



A Hyperbole-Based Account of the Paradoxical Usage of "Literally"

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JOHN BARNDEN
University of Birmingham
j.a.barnden@cs.bham.ac.uk

Abstract

The word “literally” is often used in ways widely derided as improper. A key use is to intensify a metaphor, as in the sentences “When John discovered the theft, he literally exploded” and “Journalists are literally animals.” However, some researchers have argued that the alleged improper uses are in fact proper, being based on general semantic/pragmatic principles. The present article strongly reaffirms this properness, but presents a novel account of it. Simultaneously, it goes beyond metaphor intensification, and explains how “literally” intensifies statements about parthood importance as in “Sailing is literally Mike’s life.” The account casts the metaphor and part-importance cases as hyperbole in a simple, unified and novel way. The hyperbole rests on the simple but overlooked fact that literal identity automatically implies the maximal point on a degree-of-likeness or part-importance scale. In short, likeness and importance-graded parthood relationships have the mathematical property of reflexivity, and this supports reflexive hyperbole concerning likeness and part-importance respectively. (Elsewhere, the author discusses a loosened notion of reflexivity that brings in further types of reflexive hyperbole.)

Reflexive hyperbole provides a more straightforward and definite theory of the intensifying use of “literally” than other suggested accounts. But it is of much more general importance as it has no particular connection to “literally”: rather, it is a candidate interpretation route whenever a hearer considers the literal meaning of an expression, for whatever reason, and a reflexive relationship is suitably at issue. As an important special case, the article briefly recapitulates a reflexive-hyperbole account (Barnden 2015) of the intensifying effect of sentences such as “Journalists aren’t merely like animals, they ARE animals”, and extends the account to sentences such as “Sailing isn’t merely part of Mike’s life, it is his life.”

Key words: literally, intensification, hyperbole, metaphor, simile, reflexivity.

1. Introduction

The word “*literally*” is often used paradoxically, as in “*When John discovered the theft he literally exploded*” in a context where a real, physical explosion (as of a bomb or balloon, say) is not intended, so that John did *not* “explode” in a literal sense. Similarly, “*Journalists are literally animals*” would typically be a metaphorical claim. The paradoxical use has long and often been derided as “improper”—a misuse of language. See, e.g., Echo Reporter (2010), Muther (2011); and see Nerlich & Chamizo Domínguez (2003) [henceforth N&CD] for further references. Because of the widespread offence that the word “*literally*” causes in such use, but also for brevity, I will call it *the l-word*. Of course, the l-word is often non-paradoxical, as stressed by N&CD. A speaker might reasonably intend “*John literally fell off his chair laughing*” to be taken literally, depending on context.

Some researchers—notably Israel (2002, 2005) and Nerlich & Chamizo Domínguez (2003)— have cogently argued that the paradoxical, allegedly improper usages are in fact perfectly proper, being firmly based on general semantic/pragmatic principles. For instance, perhaps “*John literally exploded*” prompts the hearer to refresh the metaphor by re-relate John's behaviour to literal, physical exploding, rather than merely retrieving a relatively bland, entrenched metaphorical meaning of “*explode*.” The l-word is thus properly and crucially drawing attention to a literal meaning.

I assume that, in paradoxical uses, the l-word often intensifies meaning, following other authors and dictionaries such as N&CD, Israel (2002, 2005) and the Oxford English Dictionary online (*OED online*, www.oed.com). For instance, I assume that “*John literally exploded*,” when metaphorical, is often interpreted as describing a more intense reaction than simply “*John exploded*.” I concentrate on this intensifying role, and reaffirm that it is well-motivated. But I will present a new explanation. This casts the phenomenon as a case of a neglected but widely important type of hyperbole, namely *reflexive hyperbole*.

This approach avoids some problems in existing accounts of how the l-word intensifies metaphor, including the metaphor-refreshment suggestion above. The new approach also naturally extends to use of the l-word to intensify certain *non-metaphorical* relationships, as when “*Andrew's job at the school is literally his life*” intensifies the importance of the role that a part (here the job) plays in a whole (Andrew's life).

The account also has a unifying function in easily explaining other apparently separate phenomena, not involving the l-word. One such phenomenon is *corrective juxtapositions* that intensify, such as (i) “*The internet isn't merely like crack cocaine, it IS crack cocaine*” and (ii) “*Sailing isn't just part of Mike's life, it is his life*.” Barnden (2015) analysed the likeness-intensifying case, exemplified by (i). Barnden (2016) briefly presented a start on the part-importance intensifying case, exemplified by (ii), and undertakes more

detailed exploration in Barnden (in press). I argue that “*it IS crack cocaine*” in (i) and “*it is his life*” in (ii) are to be taken as reflexively hyperbolic.

Reflexive hyperbole appears not to have received significant attention prior to Barnden (2015, 2016). Its possibility arises whenever a graded relationship has the very special property of being *reflexive* in a standard mathematical sense. A relationship that can apply to varying degrees between entities of some type T (e.g., people) is reflexive if and only if

any entity of type T bears the relationship to itself, and does so to the maximum possible degree (i.e., no other instance of the relationship holds to a higher degree).

(This notion of reflexivity is borrowed from the standard notion of reflexivity for “fuzzy” relations that is given in Zadeh 1971.). For instance, the relationship of likeness (of any sort) between physical objects is reflexive: any given object X is like itself to the maximum possible degree—no object can be more like X than X itself. Similarly, parthood, when graded as to the importance of the role that the part plays in the whole, is reflexive—no part of something X can play a more important role in X than X itself.

Reflexivity facilitates hyperbole as follows. If a sentence’s literal meaning is that Y is the same thing as X then, according to this meaning, Y would have the maximum possible likeness to X. But the hearer may take this implied claim of maximum likeness just as hyperbolic claim about an especially high degree of likeness between Y and X, if this is appropriate in context. For instance, “*John is Hitler*” can be hyperbolic for an especially high degree of likeness between John and Hitler, because if John really were the same person as Hitler than of course he would be maximally like Hitler. Similarly, “*Sailing is Mike’s life*” can be hyperbolic for sailing playing an especially important role in Mike’s life, because if Mike’s life literally consisted just of sailing then of course it would have the maximal possible importance in his life.

Notice that these observations do not require bringing in any detailed notion of what likeness or parthood consists in. Reflexive hyperbole is just a simple, immediately available opportunity provided by reflexivity, and reflexivity is a simple, immediate aspect of the notions of likeness and importance-graded parthood (though below we need to address a worry about whether wholes are parts of themselves).

A caution, however: there are other ways in which one might be hyperbolic about likeness or part importance, for instance by means of “*John is so like Hitler you could send him back in time to rule Nazi Germany*” and “*Sailing is such a big part of Mike’s life he doesn’t have time to eat.*” These do not exploit reflexivity of likeness or importance-graded parthood, and are therefore not instances of *reflexive* hyperbole.

While reflexive hyperbole appears to be a novel topic, hyperbole of some sort is often mentioned briefly in claims about the l-word. The *Merriam Webster dictionary online* says that phrases like “*literally turn the world upside down*”

are pure hyperbole, but it gives no further explanation. The *OED online* says the l-word has the following colloquial uses/meanings:

- (1) “Used to indicate that some (freq. conventional) metaphorical or hyperbolic expression is to be taken in the strongest admissible sense: ‘virtually, as good as’; (also) ‘completely, utterly, absolutely’.”

However, we will see that the qualifier “in the strongest admissible sense” is unclear and misguided.

A few comments about hyperbole in general are in order. In hyperbolic uses of, say, “Peter has hundreds [or thousands/millions/...] of pets” or “Everyone in the audience was laughing,” the speaker is emphasizing the number of pets or the size of an audience subset. The literal meaning involves an extreme value, but the hearer engages in a descent on the relevant scale to some less extreme value. The speaker’s intent might simply be dispassionately to communicate an unusually high value, but, according to many researchers such as Brdar-Szabó & Brdar (2010), Carston & Wearing (2015), McCarthy & Carter (2004) and Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza (2017) there is often an expression of some pointed affect, e.g., delight at the number of pets or disgust at the laughing. Even in the most dispassionate cases there is arguably some weak affect such as mild surprise.

We can conveniently summarize these points by saying that hyperbole conveys that the relevant actual value, e.g., the number of pets Peter has, is *notably high*, where what counts as “notable” depends on discourse context. A value can be notably high through being much higher than normal, as when Peter has twenty pets. Or a value can be notably high because high enough to warrant strong affect: for example, even if Peter only has half a dozen pets a particular speaker who finds this troublesome might say he has hundreds for emphasis. I use the “notably high” formulation throughout the remainder of the article. (In Barnden 2015 and elsewhere I have used terms such as “very high” but now view “notably high” as more accurate and more neutral theoretically.)

The plan of the article is as follows. Section 2 explains the corrective-juxtaposition phenomenon of interest, where likeness or parthood-importance is intensified, largely summarizing parts of work presented elsewhere (Barnden, 2015, 2016, in press) but making additional points. Section 3 extends that account to explain intensifying, paradoxical uses of the l-word. Section 4 critiques several previous claims about such uses. Section 5 concludes, and in particular briefly mentions a loosed form of reflexive hyperbole that applies to some relationships other than likeness and importance-graded parthood.

2. The Corrective Juxtapositions of Interest

This section first summarizes the approach to likeness-intensifying corrective juxtapositions in Barnden (2015), though with a significant new ideas in

sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.3. The section then extends the approach to part-importance-intensifying juxtapositions, in line with Barnden (in press). I go into considerable detail because it sets the scene for the treatment of the l-word in section 3.

Examples (2–5) intensify a likeness. (Underlining indicates italics in the original.)

(2) “*The Internet Isn't ‘Like’ Crack, It Is Crack.*”¹

(3) “*Big government isn’t just like show business, it is show business.*”²

(4) “*The director’s exploitation of this actor is like filming a drowning man and doing nothing — in fact, it isn't merely like that, that's exactly what it is.*”³

(5) “*John isn’t just like Hitler, HE IS HITLER!*”⁴

By contrast, the next examples, (6–8), intensify the importance of the role that a part of a whole plays in a whole, using varying notions of importance that will be discussed below. The correcting clause has the same A-is-B form as in examples (2–5), but (presumably) now with a meaning concerning parthood importance rather likeness:-

(6) “*[T]he Christian faith has been an integral part of his life. In fact, it is his life. He can't recall a time without God in his life.*”⁵

(7) “*When partnering with L&W Supply [a building supply company], you'll see that safety isn't just part of our culture, it is our culture.*”⁶

(8) “*[Nietzsche's philosophy] is a part of [Nathaniel's] life. It is his life.*”⁷

Sections 2.1 and 2.2 look at the likeness-intensification and part-importance intensification cases in turn.

¹ From <http://thebillfold.com/2012/07/the-internet-isnt-like-crack-it-is-crack/> (last accessed 27 February 2017). “Crack” refers here to crack cocaine.

² From <http://www.arachnoid.com/lutusp/symbols.html> (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

³ From <http://ethicsalarms.com/2010/09/16/casey-affleck-worst-brother-in-law-of-the-year/> (accessed 27 Feb 2017)

⁴ Adapted from second into third person from http://www.gotoquiz.com/how_much_like_hitler_are_you/comments.html (accessed on 23 March 2012; the particular example is no longer there, as of 27 Feb 2017).

⁵ From https://www.cbn.org/700club/guests/bios/james_ingram_021009.aspx (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

⁶ From <http://www.lwsupply.com/safety.html> (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

⁷ From <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/leoploeb/darrowclosing.html> (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

2.1 Likeness-Intensifying Corrective Juxtapositions

2.1.1 The Problem

Chiappe & Kennedy (2000) presented experimental results that suggest that corrective juxtapositions such as (2–5) intensify the likeness being conveyed, by intensifying individual shared features conveyed by A-is-like-B and/or adding new ones. But Chiappe and Kennedy ask why such intensification happens. This is a puzzle, given that the experiments also showed that generally the A-is-B forms are *not* interpreted more intensely as regards likeness-degree than the corresponding A-is-like-B similes when they are *not* juxtaposed with them (though they may be systematically stronger than the similes in respects other than likeness).

So it seems that the juxtaposition itself, not the change of form, is leading to the intensification.

2.1.2 Our Solution: Reflexive Hyperbole about Likeness

Barnden (2015) proposes the possibility of interpreting a statement of form A-is-B as *reflexive hyperbole about likeness* (though using different terminology in that paper). That the A-is-B clause is *some* sort of hyperbole may be intuitively obvious, so the important point is what exactly the nature of this hyperbole is. It is hyperbole provided by the reflexive nature of the likeness relationship.

The reflexive hyperbolic interpretation of, say, “*John is Hitler*” in (5) casts it as a hyperbolic version of “John is like Hitler to a notably high degree.” I will abbreviate this to “John is notably alike to Hitler.” The simile “*John is like Hitler,*” negated in the first clause of (5), of course *allows* the degree to be notably high degree. But it does not ensure this. Hence, to make sense of the corrective juxtaposition, the hearer assumes there is reflexive hyperbole about likeness. This then guides whatever method he might use for discerning a particular likeness between A and B (see below) towards delivering notably high likeness.

The hyperbolic interpretation relies on reflexivity in the way sketched in the Introduction. The reflexivity consists in the fact that *identity is at the top of the scale of likeness*. Nothing can be more like Hitler than Hitler himself. So “*John is Hitler,*” if it were taken literally, would implicitly claim the absolutely maximum possible likeness of John to Hitler. But this maximum can just be taken as hyperbole for a claim of some notably high degree of likeness—within of course the practical bounds imposed by the actual natures of John and Hitler.

This sort of analysis caters for (4) as well as (5), assuming that the correcting part of (4) literally states an identity between the director’s exploitative act

and the mentioned (imaginary) act of filming a drowning man and doing nothing.

In (2, 3) the correcting part does not literally state an identity between entities, but categorizes an entity as being within a type (show business) or as being an instance of a substance (crack cocaine). The argument goes through much as for identity, with some added indirectness. We concentrate on (3), but (2) works similarly.

If big government (or a specific instance of it) were in fact an instance of show business, it would have maximum possible likeness to that particular instance. But because some instances of show-business category may be more perfect instances than others—if the category is centred on a prototype, or defined by exemplars—that particular instance of show business would only be guaranteed to have *near*-maximal likeness to the prototype or most perfect instances. Near-maximal here means that the likeness is higher than for entities that are not instances of show business at all. So, big government, as literally an instance of show business, would be near-maximally like the prototype or most perfect instances. But *near*-maximal likeness is still extremely high on the likeness scale, and therefore still high enough to warrant taking it as hyperbolic for notably strong likeness to the best examples of show business.

That is the argument given in Barnden (2015), but an alternative and simpler argument is as follows. It gives a somewhat weaker result, but this may be more reasonable in many contexts. We still have the idea that if big government were literally an instance of show business, it would have maximal possible likeness to that particular instance. But we now take this implied claim to be hyperbolic for big government being notably alike to that particular instance of show business, rather than to the most perfect instances. But this can still reasonably be paraphrased as the claim that big government is notably alike to show business. After all, if we explicitly said “Big government is notably alike to show business” we would not necessarily be going for the most perfect instances.

Notice the important divergence of our claims from the elliptical-simile view of metaphor (see, e.g., Fogelin 2011). This says that, for instance, “*big government is show business*” when taken metaphorically means the same as its corresponding *non-intensified simile* “*big government is like show business.*” Also the view merely postulates that sameness of meaning, giving no rationale for it.

2.1.3 Determining a Particular Notably Strong Likeness

The conclusion from the above sort of reflexive hyperbolic interpretation of “A is B” is merely that there is notably strong likeness between A and B. It does not tell the hearer what the specific similarity is, any more than the bare simile “A is like B” does.

To discern a specific likeness, the hearer might do one or more of several things. The matter depends on one's theory of metaphor and simile and on the discourse context. The hearer might

- (a) adopt as is, or intensify, a likeness between A and B that is *explicitly specified* in the context, and in fact the actual context of (3), for instance, says “no audience, no show,” specifying that big government needs something akin to an audience. Or,
- (b) if B has an entrenched meaning applicable to A, or if A-is-B or A-is-like-B has an entrenched meaning, the hearer might intensify the *entrenched meaning*. Within this possibility I include the use of entrenched mappings making up conceptual metaphors, to map from aspects of B to aspects of A. Or
- (c) the hearer might proceed with the literal meaning of B and use some method he would traditionally use for finding a metaphorical relationship from scratch between B's literal meaning and A. Major possibilities include transferring salient features of literal B that are relevant to A, building a structured analogy between A and literal B (see, e.g., Bowdle & Gentner 2005) or retrieving/constructing a superordinate category covering them (see, e.g., Glucksberg 2001). I call (c) the hearer's *traditional literal-based metaphor interpretation route* for the particular A/B pair.

Note that (a,b,c) are not mutually exclusive and hybrid methods are possible.

Importantly, using route (c) without the guidance of reflexive hyperbole would not be enough to give a more intense result than the A-is-like-B simile. This is because of general observations about metaphor in discourse. One observation, presented at greater length in Barnden (2015), is that non-entrenched metaphor such as in “*Compassion is a sloth*” can, depending on the context, convey anything from a very low to a notably high degree of likeness; and when context provides no guide it is extremely vague as to the degree. In these ways is no different from the corresponding simile “*Compassion is like a sloth*.” So, if route (c) were to be used in interpreting an A-is-B in a corrective juxtaposition such as (2–5), it is nevertheless the adoption *also* of a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation that guides the process towards notably strong likeness, as a special case.

If explicitly specified or entrenched likeness is available—as in (a) or (b) respectively—are available to the hearer in a particular case, it would be beneficial for him simply to exploit it, intensifying it as may seem appropriate, rather than going to the trouble of seeking additional features, especially if this means following elaborate mechanisms of finding analogies or superordinate categories. Thus, in many cases of reflexive hyperbole about likeness there is a cheap and quick way of getting an intensified meaning. But even if extra qualities of the literal B do seem to be needed, it still saves work to start from explicitly specified or entrenched likeness.

As an example relevant to (5), it is common to compare people to Hitler, and he has become a standard example of an extreme dictator. To the extent that such usage is entrenched, certain features such as oppressiveness, hate, bombast, etc. may be standardly transferred to the target, and others ignored. But, because of the entrenchment, the features as transferred are, I assume, typically weaker than in Hitler himself. So they stand ready to be intensified.

The upshot is that an important, distinctive feature of our proposal is that, while it crucially proceeds via literal meaning (of say “Hitler”) it may then abandon that meaning in addressing the *separate* task of determining a particular likeness between A and B.

2.2 Corrective Juxtapositions that Intensify Part-Importance

Essentially the same approach applies to (6–8) as to (2–5). The difference is that a different scale is now being used. Instead of one concerning the likeness of A to B, we have a scale concerning how important a role a part A plays in B. Just as likeness is reflexive, so is parthood as graded by importance-of-role, for whatever particular notion of role importance is relevant to the context. A’s being identical to B takes us to the maximum level of role-importance: obviously, no part of B can play a more important role within B than B itself, because whatever it is that A contributes to B is *ipso facto* contributed by any part containing A, and in particular by B itself. So A-is-B can be taken as a hyperbolic version of the claim that A is a notably important part of B, not merely a part of B. So we have reflexive hyperbole about part-importance.

This argument takes the view that any whole, B, is also a part of itself. But the explanation still goes through in a modified form if we do not view wholes as parts of themselves. It remains the case that there is no part of B that can contribute more to B than B itself does, so we can still use the importance of role that B plays for itself as hyperbole for a notably high importance of a part. For simplicity I will continue on the stance that anything is a part of itself. This stance is standard (though not universal) in the theory of parthood, according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.⁸

What notion of role importance is in play is context-sensitive. For instance when A is an activity and B is person P’s life then the role importance measure can be, for instance, how much of P’s lifespan has been occupied with A, how much of each of P’s days is currently taken up by A, how much A is in P’s thoughts, how much of P’s emotional energy is taken up with A, or how big a role A plays in governing B. In example (7), where B is a company’s culture and A is safety, the importance is the relative weight given to safety in the culture, e.g., how much of the company’s time and effort is spent on safety compared to the total spent on culture.

⁸ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mereology/>.

One might wonder whether application of whole-for-part metonymy to B would deliver a hyperbolic interpretation about part-importance, but it is difficult to see how it could. Consider “*The university has decided to invest in robotic lecturers,*” meaning that a small executive group running the university has so decided. The executive group in a university is a salient and important part. But the group is not necessarily important enough to warrant saying “*The executive group IS the university,*” which implies a role importance going beyond the normal salient function of the group. This matter is discussed further in Barnden (in press).

3. The Proposed Explanation of Paradoxical L-Word Usage

3.1 Paradoxical Use of the L-Word with Metaphor

Here are some examples:-

(9) “*The internet literally exploded with hilarious pictures and gifs following the second presidential debate on Oct. 9.*”⁹

(10) “*will literally turn the world upside down to combat cruelty or injustice*”¹⁰

(11) “*working so that you literally can feel your brain creaking with the effort.*”¹¹

(12) “*Journalists are literally animals.*”¹²

In all these examples it is reasonable to suggest that the meanings have an especially high level of intensity, more intense than they would have been without “literally.” How does this intensification arise?

3.1.1 The Basis of the Explanation: Reflexive Hyperbole Again

I propose that reflexive hyperbole about likeness provides the intensification. In particular, (12) can be interpreted in just the same hyperbolic way as “[*journalists*] are animals” would be in the corrective juxtaposition “*Journalists aren’t merely like animals, they are animals.*” It is just that the l-word, rather than juxtaposition, is now what brings the literal meaning strongly to the hearer’s attention. Other than this, the hyperbole works as in section 2.1.2: the (apparent) literal categorization of journalists as animals can

⁹ From <http://hollywoodlife.com/2016/10/10/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-singing-time-of-my-life-debate-meme-video/> (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

¹⁰ From <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/literally> (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

¹¹ From the *GloWbE* corpus (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

¹² Adapted from “I saw journalists become animals, literally” – an example quoted by N&CD.

be interpreted hyperbolically because of the reflexivity of likeness, i.e. because the likeness of anything to itself is at the maximum possible degree.

Even though (9–11) do not have A-is-B form, they can with some indirection be treated in the same way as (12), through viewing them as implying identities. For instance, the literal meaning of (9) is that what happened with the internet was a physical explosion, and this provides a maximal point on the scale of likeness of the internet event to a physical explosion.

Now, this analysis provides intensification of the *degree of likeness* of target and source (e.g. internet events and explosion), but what we want is intensification of qualities of the target itself, such as the extent and speed of placing images on the internet. But the latter intensification easily follows. Because of the likeness-degree intensification, the intensity of particular, highly intense qualities of real explosions such as suddenness and size of effect are brought more fully to bear on the internet events, and/or additional intense properties are conscripted.

But although the hearer *can* take a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation on being alerted to the literal meaning by the l-word, there is not the sort of pressure on him to seek intensification as there was in corrective juxtapositions. So why and under what conditions does intensification result?

We take first the case where there is no explicitly specified or entrenched likeness available to the hearer –cf. possibilities (a) and (b) in section 2.1.3. Then the hearer has no option but to proceed by his traditional literal-based interpretation method—possibility (c) in that section. As it would be extra work to *also* ensure that notably-strong likeness results, we do *not* predict that the hearer typically derives an intensified meaning in this case.

By contrast, if an explicitly specified or entrenched likeness is available, it is less work for the hearer to assume, in effect, that the l-word is suggesting reflexive-hyperbolic intensification of that already-available likeness than to work out likeness afresh using traditional literal-based interpretation.

And in all of (9–12), the metaphors are entrenched, as is easily revealed by searching for examples on the internet. This point resonates with, for instance, the *OED online* saying (in (1)) that the paradoxical use is frequently with conventional metaphor, and with Israel (2005)'s stronger claim that it is always so. All the examples given by N&CD in the relevant part of their paper are intensifications of familiar metaphorical or of minor creative embellishments of such phraseology. While I have not seen a study providing evidence for the maximal claim that the l-word *never* intensifies entirely non-entrenched metaphor, I have not yet found a convincing example of such use, except in a rather special class I leave aside for reasons of space.

3.1.2 Reflexive Hyperbole Even When the L-Word is Absent

Reflexive hyperbole about likeness is in principle possible even for an A-is-B that does not contain the l-word and that is not juxtaposed with its corresponding simile. One case may be when context influences the hearer to consider the literal meaning of B by making literal use of related terms. For example, there may have been literal talk of dogs shortly before the utterance of “*journalists are animals.*” Then the literal meaning of “animals” may be stimulated in the hearer’s mind, so the hearer may conceivably opt to use it in his interpretation of the metaphor, even though he could just have used the entrenched metaphorical meaning. But, again, a hyperbolic interpretation exploiting the entrenched meaning is likely to be easier than traditional literal-based interpretation.

The theory would therefore be consistent with some tendency for intensification to arise when a familiar metaphorical source B is “awakened” by its resonance with surrounding literal usages, even when a non-intensified meaning fits with the context.

3.2 Paradoxical Use of the L-Word with Talk of Parts

There is another important but rather neglected branch of the paradoxical use, as illustrated in (13, 14), where part-importance rather than likeness is intensified:

(13) “*Brennan, like all great comic characters, is a tragic soul, and his part-time teaching job in a night school quite literally is his life.*”¹³

(14) “*I’m taking a six-month break from work, so the child literally is my day’s story now.*”¹⁴

Examples such as (13, 14) can readily be explained as exercises in reflexive hyperbole about part-importance of just the sort that explains part-importance-intensifying corrective juxtapositions in section 2.2. Thus, “[*the teaching job*] *quite literally is his life*” is effectively treated as a reflexive hyperbolic version of “*the teaching job is a notably important part of his life*” (or more precisely: “*the teaching job plays a notably important role in his life*”).

But we should note that, parallel to examples such as (13, 14), there are ones that do not include the l-word, as in

¹³ From <http://www.rte.ie/tv/theenglishclass/index.html> (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

¹⁴ From <http://babyexperiment.blogspot.co.uk/#/> (accessed 16 Feb 2017). I will assume that “child” is being used metonymically to refer to the child-caring that is needed, as made clear by the context on that webpage.

(15) “[Ray] Charles can't stop the music because music, he says, is his life.”¹⁵

Many such examples can be found on the web. The question is whether they would differ in intensity if the l-word were to be included. For (15), for example, the matter depends on the extent to which the template “A is [someone P’s] life” has become entrenched with a part-importance meaning and has thereby weakened. If it has done so to a great degree, then the l-word would lead to intensification by stimulating the literal meaning and thereby encouraging fresh use of the reflexive-hyperbolic route. In the absence of such entrenchment, our theory would claim the hearer adopts a fresh reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation whether the l-word is present or absent, so there would be no difference in intensity.

3.3 Paradoxical L-Word Use with Ordinary Hyperbole

Ordinary hyperbolic statements such as “Sally has hundreds [or: thousands, millions, etc.] of pets” or “it’s freezing in here” can be further intensified by including the l-word, as in “Sally has literally millions of pets” or “It’s literally freezing in here.” We can readily explain this intensification on the following assumptions: (a) the practice of using certain types of scalar term (numbers, quantities, temperatures, ...) hyperbolically is entrenched, and/or particular such terms have entrenched hyperbolic meanings, (b) such entrenchment has led to the meaning being considerably weakened compared to a hyperbolic meaning worked out from scratch from the literal meaning, and (c) the l-word leads the hearer to work it out from scratch.

This analysis shows that the working of the l-word in conjunction with metaphor or talk of parts is essentially the same as its working in normal cases of hyperbole-intensification. The differences lie merely in what scales are used and how one is directed to an extreme point on it from which to descend. Ordinary hyperbole provides an extreme point explicitly, whereas in reflexive hyperbole a step is needed from identity to the maximum point of the degree scale of the relevant reflexive relationship.

3.4 Use of the L-Word in Corrective Juxtapositions

In corrective juxtapositions as in section 2 there is emphasis on the “is” in the correcting part. There can be an explicit emphasizing device such as italicization or capitalization of the “is” as in (3,5), or use of “exactly” to qualify it as in (4). However, even without such a device it is evident that the “is” is emphasized because of the contrast with an is-like or an is-part-of. An explicit

¹⁵ From <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ray-charles-music-is-his-life/> (accessed 28 Feb 2017).

device is therefore arguably redundant, providing no further intensification of likeness or part-importance. The reason for raising this issue is that the emphasizing device can be the l-word, as in:

- (16) “*Music isn't simply a significant part of the everyday life of Chuck Macist, it's literally his everyday life[.]*”¹⁶

Therefore we do not expect the l-word to provide additional intensification here, at least if “A is [someone P’s] life” does not have entrenched part-importance meaning (see section 3.2). Instead, we just have redundant pressure on the hearer to take a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation. But if there is such an entrenched meaning then the l-word could boost the intensifying effect of (16).

4. Other Accounts

Here we look at various prominent suggestions as to the intensifying meaning/use of the l-word. One interesting claim we leave aside is the one by Givoni, Giora & Bergerbest (2013) that the l-word steers the hearer to meanings low on salience, irrespective of their literalness or otherwise. But that account is not aimed at explaining intensification.

4.1 OED: Intensification to Strongest Admissible Sense

Definition (1) in the Introduction says that the l-word can signal that a (metaphorical or hyperbolic) expression is to be taken in the *strongest admissible* sense. But it is highly obscure what “admissible” means here and whether any reading of it gives a correct result. Consider “*Sally has literally thousands of pets*” where it is clear that she cannot possibly have thousands. Surely this does not convey, for instance, that the number is the highest number of pets that Sally could *conceivably* have in practice (below thousands) given her particular circumstances. If the hearer knows where Sally lives then he might calculate that she physically has *room* for, let us say, about three hundred small pets, if she crowds them together enough, but does he therefore take her actually to have about three hundred explosion just because there is nothing in the context to contradict this? Similarly, it is doubtful that a hearer of “*John literally exploded*” would *assume* he spat out saliva in his expostulations, just because this increases likeness to a real explosion and the context does not refute it.

In contrast, this article’s account only says that the likeness is understood to be notably strong in context, not that it is as strong as possible given the context.

¹⁶ From <http://www.chuckmacist.com/> (accessed 27 Feb 2017).

4.2 Synonym of “Figuratively” or “Metaphorically”

Perhaps the l-word has become through time a synonym for *figuratively* or *metaphorically*? This intuition is commonly expressed in informal discussions of the l-word (e.g., Muther 2011). It is adopted as one possibility by N&CD, and is noted by Israel (2005).

But the intuition fails to explain the intensification that many people, including holders of the intuition, appear to sense in examples like “*John literally exploded with anger*” or “*It’s literally freezing in here.*” If one replaced “literally” by “metaphorically” or “figuratively” as appropriate one would surely lose the intensification. I am not aware of anyone claiming, or any basis for supposing, that “John figuratively [or: metaphorically] exploded” is more intense as to the nature of what John did than “John exploded” is.

4.3 Metaphor Refreshment

When the l-word intensifies ordinary hyperbole that has entrenched and thereby weakened meaning, it refreshes the hyperbole by starting afresh from the literal meaning (section 3.3). A parallel explanation could be entertained for the l-word’s intensification of metaphor that has weakened, entrenched meaning: the l-word leads the hearer to consider the metaphor afresh—i.e. as if completely novel—and to use his traditional literal-based metaphor-interpretation method (section 2.1.3, clause (c)). I am abstracting this as a possible explanation from various comments by, for instance, N&CD and O’Donoghue (2009), though those authors may not themselves subscribe to it.

It is indeed a reasonable suggestion that fresh use of the traditional literal-based interpretation would lead to at least *somewhat* more intense metaphorical meaning than entrenched ones. But recall from section 2.1.3 that the likeness degree delivered by traditional literal-based interpretation can be anything from low to notably high, or be vague across this range, depending on context, so there is no reason to expect that the intensification of the weakened entrenched meaning would deliver a notably strong effect. By contrast, reflexive hyperbole does securely provide a notably strong effect, more easily explaining the l-word’s marked intensifying effect.

Moreover, metaphor refreshment does not generalize to part-importance intensification, as in “*Sailing is literally Mike’s life.*” There is now simply no technique analogous to traditional literal-based metaphor interpretation. For instance, unless one already knows enough about Mike’s life to see how important a part sailing is of it, there is no way of just considering sailing and his life in conjunction that would deliver the result that sailing is a notably important part—yet “*Sailing is literally Mike’s life*” conveys notable importance, to whatever level is needed to understand the overall discourse, in the absence of any knowledge of Mike’s specific life.

4.4 Speaker Commitment

According to Israel (2002, 2005), in saying “literally B” the speaker is committing to the appropriateness of the relevant meaning of B—e.g., a particular metaphorical meaning of B—and the particular appropriateness of putting that meaning as “B.”

But such commitment is simply not enough all by itself to reliably and convincingly explain intensification: it is too open to different possibilities. When someone commits to “*exploded*” in saying “*John literally exploded*,” why shouldn’t she just be committing to “*exploded*” being the appropriate *familiar* metaphorical word and to its ordinary, *non-intensified*, entrenched meaning being particularly appropriate? Israel (2002) does provide a rather tentative link between commitment and intensification, pointing out that (i) “what makes a particular predicate particularly appropriate is often that it holds [intensely]”, so that (ii) insistence on something holding “may invite the inference” that it holds intensely. He applies this to, for instance, “*The book is literally filled with rhymes, tongue-twisters, ...*” But it is unclear why a hearer would plump for an interpretation that rests on point (i) as opposed to one that relies on the ordinary intensity of the phrase “*filled with*,” i.e. as merely saying “contains a lot of”. And, as regards (ii), an insistence on the notion of being-filled-with could well be merely a reaction to a claim that it is not the case that there are many rhymes, etc. in the book, rather than being a particularly strong claim about the abundance of rhymes.

Again, it is unclear how the account could work for part-importance intensification. Just saying that the speaker commits to “[*Brennan’s job*] is his life” being a particularly good way of expressing her meaning does not explain the respect in which it is a good way, or how the hearer is to see what she means.

5. Conclusion

This article agrees with other authors who claim that the allegedly improper uses of the l-word, “literally”, are—on the contrary—proper. However, the article proposes a new explanation, avoiding some problems with other accounts. The approach caters straightforwardly not only for the most commented-upon case—meaning intensification of metaphorical expressions—but also the intensification of part-importance expressions, while simultaneously being a natural extension of how ordinary hyperboles such as “millions of pets” work.

The key to the approach is reflexive hyperbole, which includes reflexive hyperbole about likeness and reflexive hyperbole about the importance of the roles that parts play in wholes. Reflexive hyperbole is applicable to any reflexive relationship, not just likeness or importance-graded parthood, but these are ones that seem particularly salient in discourse in the case of A-is-B statements, and we can treat other types of statement, say, “John exploded” (when metaphorical) as equivalent to “John did something like [literally]

exploding.” Reflexive hyperbole is a straightforward and immediate opportunity opened up by reflexivity of relationships, and the reflexivity of likeness and part-importance is a simple aspect of these relationships, requiring no particular theory of their nature.

Reflexive hyperbole has nothing intrinsically to do with the I-word. It is just that the I-word prompts the hearer to consider literal meaning of the relevant expression. But there are many other circumstances in which the hearer might consider literal meaning. A consideration of literal meaning might be prompted by surrounding related wording, as in, say, “*The journalists had dogs with them and were themselves animals,*” with “*dogs*” leading the hearer to think of literal animals. But the main case considered in this article is corrective juxtapositions such as “*A isn’t [merely] like B, it IS B*” or “*A isn’t merely a part of B, it is B*”. Thus, this article unifies phenomena that have not previously been brought together.

For simplicity the article has been worded in a way that implies that every time the hearer adopts a reflexive hyperbolic interpretation, he goes through the process of considering the literal meaning, regarding it as implying the top of the relevant scale and then moving down the scale. But the I-word and/or the verb “to be” may have, amongst other entrenched meanings/use-patterns, one that short-circuits the process, so that “is [literally] B” can optionally be directly decoded as meaning “is a notably important part of B” or “is notably alike to B” depending on context, or “literally B’ed” directly decoded to mean “did something notably alike to [literally] B’ing.” But the article’s approach nevertheless still serves to give such meaning retrievals a simple, principled motivation.

It might be thought that, because metaphorical “A is B” transfers only some qualities of (literal) B to A, it is therefore obviously an exaggeration, so this article is not after all pointing out a new type of hyperbole. But the point about merely-partial transfer does not by itself imply that the likeness between A and B is *notably high*, merely high enough to contribute to some point addressed by the discourse. Thus, standard metaphor theory does not already cast metaphor interpretation as hyperbole under this article’s definitions.

There is also an important point about expressions that have stored, entrenched metaphorical meaning. The possibility of “reawakening” such an expression by constructing metaphorical meaning afresh from its literal meaning has often been discussed in metaphor theory. However, this article points out (in section 2.1.3) that the literal meaning might, instead, be used *only* in a cursory, passing way in the process of taking the expression as reflexively hyperbolic, leaving the specific metaphorical meaning just to be a simple intensification of the *entrenched* meaning. This appears to be a novel suggestion about the role of literal meaning in metaphor interpretation.

Barnden (in press) goes beyond the reflexive hyperbole of the present article by introducing *broadened reflexivity*. A graded relationship is broadly reflexive if, under *normal* circumstances at least, entities bear the relationship to themselves to (at least) an *extremely high* degree. Thus maximality is

loosened to extreme highness and exceptions are allowed. These loosening do not prevent the hearer taking A-is-B as hyperbolic for A bearing the relationship notably intensely to B. The resulting additional types of (more broadly) reflexive hyperbole include hyperbole about being integrated with something, being an illustration or expression of something, mentally identifying with a fictional character, impersonating someone, and having solidarity with someone. Many additional ordinary uses of A-is-B statements are therefore explained.

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