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# Expression Forms of Hyperbole in Mandarin Chinese

**Hong Shuang**

School of Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, P. R. China

**Email address:**

[hongshuang@bnu.edu.cn](mailto:hongshuang@bnu.edu.cn)

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on expression forms of hyperbole. In Mandarin Chinese, hyperbole is one of the most regular rhetorical methods which has been observed from the ancient time. Hyperbole as one of the traditional rhetorical devices has been mentioned in WEN XIN DIAO LONG in Chinese Liang of the Southern dynasties. In previous studies, description and explanation of hyperbole are normally from the perspective of pragmatics or cognitive semantics. However, in language usage, different syntactical structures can express the same or similar meanings. As for hyperbole, as long as the semantic combination of components approaches the extreme value, the meaning of hyperbole can be interpreted. The expression forms can be some words, such as some Chinese adverbs “kuai4yao4” (about to), “jiu4yao4” (be going to), “cha4dianr3” (almost), “ji1hu1” (almost), “xian3xie1” (nearly), “jian3zhi2” (simply) and “hao3xiang4” (seem). It also can be some phrases, such as modifier-head construction, subject-predicate construction, verb-complement construction and so on. Some sentences also can express the meaning of hyperbole, such as “lian” sentence, comparative sentence and so on. Even some complex sentences can express the meaning of hyperbole, such as hypothetical complex sentence and sequential complex sentence. Such research perspective can help us find out different forms of hyperbole under the same internal meaning.

**Keywords:** Hyperbole, Rhetoric, Syntax, Semantics

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## 1. Introduction

Hyperbole is an important way of expression in language. In Chinese Liang of the Southern dynasties, LIU Xie described hyperbole in WEN XIN DIAO LONG as “although the expression is exaggerating, the meaning is harmless”. In Chinese rhetorical research of hyperbole, the meaning is the most concerned aspect. Chen describes hyperbole as “exaggeration of facts in one’s speech” [1]. Zhang takes hyperbole as “based on a certain purpose and objective reality, use the conditions of words and structures to make necessary and vivid descriptions of things (describing the situation of things beyond the facts)” [2]. Wu explains hyperbole as “intentionally expanding or shrinking the original form of objective things to make people feel that they are real and reasonable” [3]. Wang takes hyperbole as “intentionally exaggerating or reducing the facts in order to make the audiences or the readers have a deeper impression of the content that the speaker or the writer are trying to express” [4]. Li and Sheng claims that hyperbole is “a rhetorical device which is used to reproduce reality through a

serious deviation between language meaning and reality” [5]. Xing says that “hyperbole expresses subjective emotions and feelings, rather than records objective facts through intentionally expanding, shrinking, or describing objective facts in advance” [6]. Wu describes hyperbole as “a rhetorical text pattern that emphasizes the smooth expression of subjective emotions while intentionally violating objective facts and logic, and exaggerating the content of the narration” [7].

However, is there a grammatical basis for the exaggeration of understanding dependent on meaning? As for the studies on hyperbole, it is normally from the perspective of rhetoric or pragmatics. Liu claims that hyperbole can be viewed as an elaboration of the words according to the selection of beliefs [8]. Pang and Xu explore hyperbole on pragmatics view and concludes that people choose linguistic items saliently deviating from the state of affairs in the real world with the intent to highlight the inter adaption to the contextual correlates in the mental or social world [9].

Zhang’s definition mentions the conditions for using words and structures [2], which has certain enlightening significance to explore the grammatical basis of exaggeration, which

enlightenments the studies on hyperbole. Li discusses the hyperbole function of “X bi Y hai W” construction and divides hyperbole into three types based on the semantical relationship between X and Y [10]. Qi explores the relationship between Chinese adverb “jianzhi” and the expression of hyperbole, which claims that “jianzhi” sentence not only shows exaggeration modality but also has utilized the rhetoric devices of hyperbole [11]. Such researches can help us find out the different forms of hyperbole under the same internal meaning.

## 2. Word Condition

At the level of words, there are some keywords, especially some adverbs that can promote exaggerated implementation. As example (1) shows, (1a) can be a true event, while (1b) can be interpreted as hyperbole. The difference between (1a) and (1b) is the usage of the adverb “kuai4yao4” (about to). That is to say, some adverbs can assist in achieving exaggerated expression. Just as Li claims that one of the explanations of Chinese adverb “kuai4” is “kuai4yao4” which means approaching a certain amount and indicates subjective massive. [12]

- (1) a. 江河里 的 水 被 蒸干了。  
jiang1he2-li de shui3 bei4 zheng1gan1-le  
river of water steamed dry  
The water in the river has been steamed dry.
- b. 江河里 的 水 快要 被 蒸干了。  
jiang1he2-li de shui3 kuai4yao4 bei4 zheng1gan1-le  
river of water about to steamed dry  
The water in the river is about to be steamed dry.

Other Chinese adverbs, such as “jiu4yao4” (be going to), “cha4dianr3” (almost), “ji1hu1” (almost), “xian3xie1” (nearly), “jian3zhi2” (simply) and “hao3xiang4” (seem) have the similar functions, shown as the following examples.

- (2) a. 这位 大夫 三天 没 醒过来。  
zhe4wei4 dai4fu san1tian1 mei2 xing3guolai  
this doctor three days not wake up  
This doctor has been unconscious for three days.
- b. 这位 大夫 差点儿 三天 没 醒过来。  
zhe4wei4 dai4fu cha4dianr3 san1tian1 mei2 xing3guolai  
this doctor almost three days not wake up  
This doctor has almost been unconscious for three days.
- (3) a. 他 是 个 傻子。  
ta1 shi4 ge sha3zi  
he is a fool  
He is a fool.
- b. 他 简直 是 个 傻子。  
ta1 jian3zhi2 shi4 ge sha3zi  
he simply is a fool  
He looks like a fool.

In example (2), the adverb “cha4dianr3” (almost) is described as “something is approaching realization (not quite accomplished)” in the dictionaries. Peng and Tao explore that the VP in the construction of “chadianermei VP” can express extreme damage and emotional states [13], which can realize the meaning of hyperbole. In example (3), the different between (a) and (b) is that (a) can be a truth while (b) is using hyperbole. Zhao and Li claim that the adverb “jian3zhi2” (simply) has the meaning of “extremely true but appearing to be false” [14]. That is to say, the adverb “cha4dianr3” and “jian3zhi2” can express the meaning of hyperbole because of their meaning of

“approaching but not reaching” which is the most important feature for expressing hyperbole.

## 3. Phrase Condition

### 3.1. Modifier-Head Construction

In a modifier-head construction, when the head is nominal, semantic collocation of the attributive and the head effects the expression of hyperbole, shown as the following examples.

- (4) a. 转不过身 的 小 县城  
zhuan3bu4guo4shen1 de xiao3 xian4cheng2  
unable to turn around small town  
a small town that one cannot turn around
- b. 转不过身 的 小 过道  
zhuan3bu4guo4shen1 de xiao3 guo4dao  
unable to turn around small passage

	zhuān3bù4guò4shēn1	de	xiao3	guo4dao4
	unable to turn around		small	aisle
	a small aisle that one cannot turn around			
c.	占地不大	的	小	县城
	zhān4dì4bù4dà4	de	xiao3	xian4cheng2
	cover a small area		small	town
	a small town with a small footprint			

The example (4a) has the meaning of hyperbole, but (4b) and (4c) can be the truth. In example (4a), the modifier “zhuān3bù4guò4shēn1” and the head “xiao3xian4cheng2” are impossible combination with semantic truth value. However, the mismatch of the attributive and the head in semantics

realizes the expression of hyperbole.

When the modifier is adverbial and the head is a verb or a verb phrase, semantic collocation of the two effects the expression of hyperbole, shown as the following examples.

(5)	a.	不	下	100次	地	整理	她的	衣服
		bu4	xia4	100-ci4	de	zheng3li3	ta1de	yi1fu
		not	under	100 times		adjust	her	clothes
		adjust her clothes no less than 100 times						
	b.	不	下	100次	地	练习	这个	动作
		bu4	xia4	100-ci4	de	lian4xi2	zhe4ge	dong4zuo4
		not	under	100 times		practice	this	action
		practice this action no less than 100 times						
	c.	反复	地		整理	她的	衣服	
		fan3fu4	de		zheng3li3	ta1de	yi1fu	
		repeatedly			adjust	her	clothes	
		adjust her clothes repeatedly						

The example (5a) has the meaning of hyperbole, but (5b) and (5c) can be true in the real world. One can adjust his/her clothes repeatedly but 100-times is impossible, while one can practice an action 100 times, such as an athlete practicing his/her movement.

### 3.2. Subject-Predicate Construction

The subject-predicate construction is one of the most common structures in languages. The semantic collocation of the subject and the predicate can express the meaning of hyperbole, shown as the following examples.

(6)	a.	吵闹声	掀翻	屋顶
		chao3nao4sheng1	xian1fan1	wu1ding3
		hubbub	overturn	roof
		The hubbub overturned the roof.		
	b.	飓风	掀翻	屋顶
		ju4feng1	xian1fan1	wu1ding3
		typhoon	overturn	roof
		The typhoon overturned the roof.		

In the example (6), the subject in (6a) is “chao3nao4sheng1” and the predicate is “xian1fan1 wu1ding3”. It is impossible that the hubbub can overturn the roof in the real world. However, the typhoon can cause the damage like that. (6a) is the expression of hyperbole.

can be an object of the verb or a relative clause of the verb. As the example (7) shows, “xing1chen2” is the object of both the verb “zhai1” in (7a) and the verb “kan4” in (7b). (7b) can be true in the real world, while (7a) is not. However, in (7c), “ping2guo3” is the object of the verb “zhai1”, which can be the truth. (7a) is the expression of hyperbole.

### 3.3. Verb-Complement Construction

In the verb-complement construction, the complement

(7)	a.	摘	星辰
		zhai1	xing1chen2
		pick	star
		pick stars	
	b.	看	星辰

	kan4	xing1chen2
	look	star
	look at stars	
c.	摘	苹果
	zhai1	ping2guo3
	pick	apple
	pick apples	

## 4. Sentence Condition

### 4.1. "Lian" Sentence

In "lian"-construction, the format is [lian+NP+ye/dou+VP]. The semantic collocation of the NP and the VP in the structure can express the meaning of hyperbole. Shown as the example

(8)	a.	连	头发	也	不	乱	一根。
		lian2	tou2fa	ye3	bu4	luan4	yi1gen1
		even	hair		not	messy	a strand
		Not even a strand of hair is messy.					
	b.	连	这点	困难	都	克服	不了
		lian2	zhe4dian3	kun4nan2	dou3	ke4fu2	bu4liao3
		even	these	difficulty	all	overcome	unable
		Not even be able to overcome this difficulty.					

(8), "tou2fa" is the NP and "bu4 luan4 yi1gen1" is the VP in (8a). Normally, that "a strand of hair is not out of place" is impossible in the real world. However, in (8b), the semantic match of the NP "zhe4dian3 kun4nan2" and the VP "ke4fu2 bu4liao3" can be the truth. The example (8a) can be illustrated as the meaning of hyperbole.

### 4.2. Comparative Sentence

The format of a comparative sentence is [bi+NP+hai/dou+adjective]. Shown as the following examples, the example (9b) can be the truth. That one is more beautiful than her mother is a very natural and normal fact in

(9)	a.	她	比	仙女	还	美。
		ta1	bi3	xian1nv3	hai2	mei3
		she	than	fairy		beautiful
		She is more beautiful than a fairy.				
	b.	她	比	妈妈	还	美。
		ta1	bi3	ma1ma	hai2	mei3
		she	than	mother		beautiful
		She is more beautiful than her mother.				

the world. However, in (9a), "xian1nv3" is the most beautiful lady in people's imagination so that if someone is more beautiful than "xian1nv3", that is to say, she has exceeded the limit of beauty, which means hyperbole.

### 4.3. Complex Sentence

Complex sentence is composed by two or several clauses. The semantical relationship of the clauses can be condition, sequence, causality, transition and so on. The semantic collocation of the clauses may express the meaning of hyperbole.

Shown as the following example, example (10) is a complex

(10)	全身	是	嘴	也	说不清。
	quan2shen1	shi4	zui3	ye3	shuo1buqing1
	whole body	is	mouth	also	cannot explain
	I can't explain clearly even with my whole body covered mouths.				

sentence (constricted compound sentence) with hypothetical relationship. Assuming that a person has a mouth all over his/her body, he or she even is unable to explain clearly. The meaning of "unable to explain clearly" can be true, but under the assumption that "one has mouths all over the body" the whole sentence expresses the meaning of hyperbole.

The following example (11) is a complex sentence with the relationship of sequence. The action "touch the pillow" should happen first, then one can fell asleep. However, if the

first clause is negative, the whole complex sentence can express the meaning of hyperbole, which means exaggeration beyond time.

(11)	头	没	挨	枕头	就	睡着了
	tou2	mei2	ai1	zhen3tou	jiu4	shui4zhao2le
	head	not	touch	pillow	at once	fell asleep
	I fell asleep without my head touching the pillow.					

## 5. Conclusion

Normally, hyperbole focuses on understanding from the perspective of meaning. However, for grammatical analysis, structure and meaning are inseparable, especially from the view of “Grand Grammar” which including syntactical structure, semantical interpretation and pragmatic usage. The above involves the interaction between structure and meaning. The interpretation of hyperbole may rely on the appearance of some words, such as some adverbs, and also relies on the structure of the phrases, such as modifier-head construction in which semantic collocation of the modifier and the head may express the meaning of hyperbole. Similarly, in subject-predicate construction, semantic collocation of the subject and the predicate can express the meaning of hyperbole. Meanwhile, in verb-complement construction, semantic collocation of the verb and its complement can realize the interpretation of hyperbole. Some sentences because of their structural features also can express the meaning of hyperbole. For example, in “lian+NP+ye/dou+VP” construction and “bi+NP+hai/dou+adjective” construction (i.e. comparative construction), semantic collocation of the components such as NP and VP /adjective may express the meaning of hyperbole.

In language usage, the same meaning has different formats of expression. That is to say, different structures can express the same meaning. Yuan studies on metaphor from a formal perspective and divides sentence patterns of metaphor into two types such as subject-predicate construction and modifier-head construction [15], which has certain significance for the research here. As for hyperbole discussed above, it can be realized through different grammatical methods. As long as the semantic combination of components approaches the extreme value, the meaning of hyperbole can be interpreted.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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