

HYPERBL: Hyperbole

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Discussion

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From The Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric



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Definition

Hyperbole (*al-mubālagha*) is an Arabic rhetorical device where the **communicator** claims that a description of intensity or weakness reaches a degree that is far-fetched or impossible.^{[1][2][3][4][5][6]}

The Arabic term *al-mubālagha* is also used in a broader sense by some classical rhetoricians to mean intensification or emphasis of expression generally, of which hyperbole in the narrow sense is one type.^{[4][6]}

Linguistic Operations

From the sources

Hyperbole operates according to two criteria applied to the claim being made:^{[1][2][4][5][6]}

- **Rational possibility** (ممكناً عقلاً): whether the described degree could in principle occur
- **Customary possibility** (ممكناً عادةً): whether the described degree ordinarily occurs in experience

These two criteria generate the three classical subtypes of hyperbole: *tabligh*, *ighrāq*, and *ghuluw*.^{[1][2][4][5][6]}

Recognition

From the sources

Hyperbole may be present when:

- A quality is described as reaching an extreme degree beyond its ordinary limit.^{[1][2][5]}
- In the case of *ghuluw*, the presence of a word such as *takādu* ("almost") may signal that an impossibility is being hedged toward acceptability.^{[4][6]}

Encyclopedia Interpretation

The following diagnostic tests aid identification:

- A quality or attribute is being described as reaching an extreme degree
- The statement involves a scalar property such as intensity, speed, generosity, quantity, or extent
- The description exceeds what is ordinary, expected, or literally true
- The context invites expressive or rhetorical reading rather than technical or factual reading

Diagnostic Communicative Enhancements

From the sources

The sources do not explicitly enumerate a systematic list of rhetorical effects for hyperbole as a whole. The following effect is directly attested:

- Hyperbole intensifies and strengthens the description of a quality by pushing it beyond its ordinary limit.^{[1][2][5]}



HYPERBL: Hyperbole

CategoryLinguistic Embellishments ('ilm al-badī')

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Provenance

Sources6

The following effects are noted by 'Atīq (2002) in the context of historical debates about hyperbole's value, rather than as a systematic enumeration of effects:

- Some critics praised hyperbole as the finest type of poetry on the grounds that it produces memorable, emotionally striking expression.^[6]
- Other critics condemned it on the grounds that it leads to falsehood and absurdity, and argued that clarity and truthfulness are more important rhetorical aims.^[6]

Applying the Recognition Framework

The information on this page can be used to evaluate whether this device is present in a candidate [lexical item](#) using the [Specific Device Recognition](#) part of the [Universal Framework for Identifying Arabic Rhetorical Devices](#):

- Use the Definition, Mechanism, and Recognition sections of this page in [Step 1](#).
- Apply the substitution test in [Step 2](#).
- Consider contextual indicators in [Step 3](#).
- Use the Diagnostic Communicative Enhancements section of this page in [Step 4](#).

Types of Hyperbole

Classical rhetoric distinguishes three types of hyperbole according to whether the exaggerated claim is possible rationally and customarily, and on this basis further distinguishes between **acceptable hyperbole** (المبالغة المقبولة) and **unacceptable hyperbole** (المبالغة المردودة).^{[1][2][4][5][6]} Al-Sakkākī and al-Qazwīnī hold that *tabligh* and *ighrāq* are acceptable; the question of acceptability arises especially with *ghuluww*.^[6]

Type 1: Rationally and customarily possible (*tabligh*)

The description is claimed to reach a degree that is possible both rationally and customarily.^{[1][2][5][6]}

Source Example

إِذَا مَا سَابَقَتْهَا الرِّيحُ قَرَّتْ وَأَلْقَتْ فِي يَدِ الرِّيحِ التُّرَابًا

"When the wind raced it, it fled — and left the dust in the wind's own hand."

Explanation

This verse describes a horse's speed. The claim is extravagant but remains possible both rationally and customarily, so it illustrates *tabligh*.^{[1][2]}

Constructed Example

هذه السيارة من أسرع السيارات التي يمكنك شراؤها بهذا السعر.

"This car is one of the fastest cars you can buy for this price."

Explanation

The claim is emphatic but remains possible both rationally and customarily.

Type 2: Rationally possible but not customarily possible (*ighrāq*)

The description is claimed to reach a degree that is rationally possible but not customarily possible.^{[1][2][5][6]}

Ighrāq is the subtype of hyperbole in which the described degree is rationally possible but customarily impossible — it can in principle occur, but does not in ordinary experience. Like *ghuluww*, *ighrāq* is subject to a hierarchy of rhetorical excellence: when accompanied by an approximating particle such as *yakādu* ("almost"), *law* ("if"), or *lawlā* ("were it not for"), the impossible claim is redeemed toward acceptability and gains in clarity and beauty; without such a particle, the figure remains valid but falls short of its full rhetorical potential.^[7]

Source Example

إِنَّ الدَّيْرَ كَذَّبُوا بآيَاتِنَا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا عَنْهَا لَا تُفَتَّحُ لَهُمْ أَبْوَابُ السَّمَاءِ وَلَا يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ حَتَّى يَلِجَ الْجَمَلُ فِي سَمِّ الْخِيَاطِ

"Those who deny Our signs and are arrogant toward them — the gates of heaven shall not be opened for them, nor shall they enter the Garden until a camel passes through the eye of a needle."

Explanation

The verse describes the impossibility of entry into paradise for those who deny God's signs, by conditioning it on a camel (or, on one reading, a thick rope) passing through the eye of a needle. The source classifies this as *ighrāq* rather than *ghuluww*: while the event is impossible in customary experience, it is not rationally impossible, since God's power could in principle bring it about. There is no approximating particle; the redemption here lies in the theological framing itself.^[7]

Source Example

لَوْ كَانَ يَقْعَدُ فَوْقَ الشَّمْسِ مِنْ كَرَمٍ قَوْمٌ بِأَوْلِيَّتِهِمْ أَوْ مَجْدِهِمْ قَعَدُوا

"Were a people to sit above the sun by virtue of their nobility, these would be the first to do so."

Explanation

Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā praises his subject by claiming that if any people could sit above the sun through sheer nobility, this tribe would be among them. Sitting above the sun is rationally possible in principle but utterly beyond customary experience, making this *ighrāq*. The particle *law* ("if / were") introduces a counterfactual structure that redeems the claim toward rhetorical acceptability.^[7]

Source Example

كَأَنَّ الْمُدَامَ وَصَوْبَ الْعَمَامِ وَرِيحَ الْخُرَامِ وَنَشْرَ الْقَطْرِ يُعَلِّلُ بِهِ بَرْدُ أَنْبَاهَا إِذَا غَرَّدَ الطَّائِرُ الْمُسْتَجِرَ

"As though wine, and the pour of rain-clouds, and the scent of lavender, and the fragrance of rain — these were what cooled her teeth, when the pre-dawn bird began to sing."

Explanation

Imru' al-Qays describes the breath of his companion at dawn by likening its fragrance to a combination of wine, rain, lavender and the scent of clouds — a sensory accumulation that is rationally possible in principle but impossible in customary experience. There is no approximating particle, making this *ighrāq* without redemption by a particle; the figure remains valid but falls short of the rhetorical excellence that a particle would confer.^[7]

Source Example

فِي مَعْرَكٍ لَا تَتِيرُ الْحَيْلُ غَيْرَهُ مِمَّا تَرَوِي الْمَوَاضِي تَرْبُهُ بِالْدَّمِ

"In a battlefield where the horses raise no dust, for the fine swords have so soaked its ground with blood."

Explanation

Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hillī describes a battlefield so drenched in blood from the swords of the warriors that the horses raise no dust from the ground. That a battlefield's soil could be so thoroughly saturated with blood as to suppress all dust is rationally possible in principle but impossible in customary experience, making this *ighrāq*. Like the previous example, the absence of any approximating particle means it falls short of the rhetorical excellence that a particle would confer.^[7]

Source Example

وَنُكْرِمُ جَارَنَا مَا دَامَ فِيْنَا وَنُتْبِعُهُ الْكَرَامَةَ حَيْثُ مَالَا

"We honour our guest as long as he stays among us, and we let honour follow him wherever he turns."

Explanation

The honour extending beyond the guest's presence remains conceivable in principle, but exceeds customary practice, illustrating *ighrāq*.^{[1][2][4]}

Constructed Example

هذه أسرع سيارة في العالم.

"This is the fastest car in the world."

Explanation

The claim remains rationally possible, though extraordinary in ordinary experience.

Type 3: Rationally and customarily impossible (*ghuluww*)

The description is claimed to reach a degree that is impossible both rationally and customarily.^{[1][2][5][6]}

Ghuluww is the most extreme form of hyperbole. Classical rhetoricians distinguished between *ghuluww maqbūl* (acceptable) and *ghuluww ghayr maqbūl* (unacceptable / rejected) *ghuluww*. Acceptability depends on whether the impossibility is redeemed by a recognisable rhetorical mechanism — most commonly an approximating particle such as *takādu* ("almost"), *law* ("if"), or *lawlā* ("were it not for"), which introduces a counterfactual structure that pulls the claim back toward the possible, or by *takhyīl*, a beautiful fantastical reimagining that signals poetic rather than literal intent. Without such a mechanism, *ghuluww* is rhetorically rejected. At its furthest extreme, *ghuluww* that attributes divine attributes — knowledge of the unseen, control of fate — to a human subject was considered by some critics to cross into *kufr* (theological error), marking an outer boundary of the device.^[8]

Encyclopedia Interpretation

The distinction between *ghuluww maqbūl* and *ghuluww ghayr maqbūl* reflects a hierarchy of rhetorical excellence rather than a binary of valid and invalid expression. *Ghuluww ghayr maqbūl* is not ruled out as a figure. It remains hyperbole, but falls short of the craft that redeems an impossibility into a rhetorically successful claim; classical critics might admire, its ambition while faulting its execution.^[8]

Source Example

تَكَادُ قِسِيُّهُ مِنْ غَيْرِ رَامٍ تُمَكِّنُ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ النَّبَالَا

"His bows almost, without an archer, lodge their arrows in their hearts."

Explanation

The bows are described as shooting by themselves, which is impossible. The word *takādu* ("almost") helps make the expression rhetorically acceptable.^{[1][2][4]}

Source Example

وَلَوْ أَنَّ مُشْتَاقًا تَكَلَّفَ فَوْقَ مَا فِي وَسْعِهِ لَسَعَى إِلَيْهِ الْمِنْبَرُ

"Were an eager man to strive beyond his capacity, the minbar itself would come to him."

Explanation

Al-Buḥturī praises the Caliph al-Mutawakkil by claiming that the minbar would hasten toward him of its own accord when he mounts to address the people — an impossibility. The particle *law* ("if / were") introduces a counterfactual structure that pulls the claim back toward acceptability, making this an instance of *ghuluww maqbūl*.^[8]

Source Example

يَذِيبُ الرُّعْبُ مِنْهُ كُلَّ عَضْبٍ فَلَوْلَا الْغَمْدُ يُمَسِّكُهُ لَسَالَ

"Terror from him melts every sharp blade — were it not for the scabbard holding it, it would flow away."

Explanation

Al-Ma'arrī describes the sword of the praised subject as so terror-inspiring that its own blade melts from sharpness — a rational and customary impossibility. The particle *lawlā* ("were it not for") introduces a counterfactual condition — the scabbard prevents the flowing — that redeems the impossibility and renders this *ghuluww maqbūl*.^[8]

Source Example

"If you could speak, you would say apologetically: what is in me is other than what is in you, O man."

Explanation

Al-Mutanabbī addresses an inanimate object — a ruined encampment (*talal*) — as though it could speak and apologise for its condition. The capacity for speech is attributed to something that cannot speak, making this a rational and customary impossibility. The particle *law* ("if") introduces the counterfactual that redeems it as *ghuluww maqbūl*.^[8]

Constructed Example

يمكنك السفر بسرعة مليار ميل في الساعة في هذه السيارة.

"You can travel at a billion miles an hour in this car."

Explanation

This is an impossible claim both rationally and customarily, and illustrates *ghuluww*. The absence of any approximating particle or fantastical reimagining means it also illustrates *ghuluww ghayr maqbūl* — rhetorically rejected hyperbole — an unredeemed impossibility that falls short of rhetorical excellence. Had the claim been phrased as "you could almost travel at a billion miles an hour," the approximating particle would have introduced a counterfactual hedge equivalent to *takādu*, rendering it *ghuluww maqbūl*.

Different from

- **ALLUSN**: **Allusion** and **CH-9: Diminishing Expression** in that Hyperbole explicitly asserts an extreme degree of a quality, whereas those devices operate through indirect reference or reduction rather than amplification.
- **BELITTL**: **Diminishing Expression** which is the semantic opposite of Hyperbole.

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