

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

**A Semantic-Pragmatic Study of Understatement
in Trump's and Biden's 2020 Presidential Debate**

**Asst.Prof.Dr.Hussain Hameed Ma'yuuf , Teeba Abdul- Razzaq Hasan
University of Babylon , College of Education for Human Sciences, Department of
English.**

**Asst.Prof.Dr.Hussain Hameed Ma'yuuf , Teeba Abdul- Razzaq Hasan,
A Semantic-Pragmatic Study of Understatement in Trump's and Biden's
2020 Presidential Debate, Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of
Egypt/Egyptology 18(4). ISSN 1567-214x.**

Key Words:understatement, semantics, pragmatics, maxims.

Introduction:

Linguistically, people are sometimes aware of what they utter, and seeking a way to say the same utterance with a higher range of politeness,so they use what is called an understatement. Understatement is a common type of figurative language used in everyday communication that often plays a significant role in adding a humorous effect to many different types of written work. It is based on a more general attenuation or semantic weakening phenomenon. Although understatement says nothing, attenuation says less and implies more. Funnily enough, the speaker can have to do more to say less.

Accordingly, the present study tries to answer the following questions: (1)is understatement used in American debates? (2)What is the main purpose behind using understatement in American debates? (3)What is the most frequent way of using understatement in American debates? Following the mentioned questions, the present study tries to achieve the following aims: (1) Showing whether(or not) their understatement used in American debates. (2) Finding out the main purpose behind using understatement in American debates. (3) Pinpointing the most frequent way in using understatement in American debates. Hence, it is hypothesized that: (1) understatement is used in American debates.(2)Modesty is the main purpose behind using understatement in American debates.(3)Being indirect is the most frequent way in using understatement in American debates. Consequently, the study follows certain procedures to achieve the aims of the study and test its hypotheses. These steps include: (1)Presenting a theoretical background about understatement semantically and pragmatically.(2)Analyzing six extracts selected from 2020 American debates.

Understatement

The speech practice of understatement consists of expressing less than what a sentence is supposed to counteract, diminish or belittle. English anthropologist Kate Fox (66:2004) identified it as a linguistic activity which is English: "The English are rightly renewed for their use of understatement, not because we invented it or because we do it better than anyone else, but because we do it so much. The reasons for our prolific understating are not hard to discover: our strict prohibitions on earnestness, gushing, emotion, and boasting require almost constant use of understatement." It is defined as a common speech figure where the literal meaning of what is said is detectably short or below the magnitude of what is being discussed, such as saying, pretty fair, meaning, splendid (Harmon 2003: 522). According to (OED) it illustrates that understatement is "A statement which falls below the truth or factual. In the prototypical situation of someone having to share a personal opinion, the practice of understatement is set out. The first person can phrase to capture the principle that understatement is extended to personal views, less generally to factual details that are

As per to Alakrash et.al (2020) Secondly, in a certain situation, to express an opinion, it is good to understate it and it is good not to say more. This also provides detailed indications of the linguistic means of understatement by stating that it is good to say "this is not bad" instead of saying "this is good" This is just one of the forms in which understatement is realized in English; for other linguistic realizations of understatement, related phrasings may be suggested. (Farese:62-62,2018). The most important aspect of offering an opinion is the mention of the interpretation of understatement by the interlocutor; it is important to remember that the interlocutor would know what the speaker wants to tell. For various purposes and effects, understatements may be used. The reason they are used, no matter what type, is the same: to make anything look less than it is. Several different kinds of understatements exist, such as:

- **Comedic:** This form of understatement brings humor to an otherwise severe situation. There is a hurricane at your holiday home, for instance, and the house is most likely badly damaged. You say, "At least the plants will get watered."
- **Modest:** Instead of bragging or boasting about something, this sort of understatement is used. For example, winning your first trophy and saying it was "not a big deal" when it was a big deal.
- **Polite:** In tough circumstances where you can disagree with someone's opinion but still want to be respectful, this form of understatement may be used. When you talk about politics, for instance, you and a friend are on opposite sides, but you simply say, "I think our opinions are slightly different on this matter." Or, if someone asks you to describe someone very short, you say, "Well, he's not tall."

So in another word, understatement is a manner in which the severity or meaning of a position, circumstance, concept, or object may be diminished by a speaker or a writer, but using language that reduces the intensity of what is being said.

Understatement is a common type of figurative language used in everyday communication that often plays a significant role in adding a humorous effect to many different types of written work.

Its various linguistic aspects are discussed to clarify this unit. The fact that this system is predominantly activated syntactically by negation. While the semantic view sheds light on its uninformativeness, the pragmatic side illustrates understatement by discussing the maxims of conversational consequences and cooperative maxims of Grice. This paper will shed light on understatement from semantic and pragmatic perspectives. Semantically how understatement is conspicuously less informative than some other states, can be used to express the meaning of the more informative statement (Israel:143,2006), and pragmatically, how the speaker infringes Grice's maxims of quantity, ('Be informative') and Manner ('Be clear'), when becoming less informative than required, and rather deliberately untruthful, obscure and ambiguous understatement will emerge.

2.1.1 Semantic perspective of Understatement

The word 'understatement' stands in contrast to the general word 'overstatement'. Saying less and meaning more is the core concept of an understatement. It is accepted as a speech statistic in which the speaker minimizes the amount of his or her speech and portrays the fact as less important than it is. It is defined as a popular speech figure where the literal significance of what is said is detectably short or below the magnitude of what is being talked about such as saying, "*pretty fair*" meanings *splendid* (Harmon 2003: 522).

A common strategy speakers use to frame the substance of what they say represents is the phenomenon of an understatement. Besides, as an understatement of the figure, it's all about informativity, or more precisely about its absence. To limit anything as an understatement is to see it as missing a certain amount of details. In effect, an understatement requires a way of expressing the content of what is said against the backdrop of any better information content that should have been said but could have been said but not. (Israel, 2008:3).

Understatement is based on a more general attenuation or semantic weakening phenomenon. Although understatement says nothing, attenuation says less and implies more. Funnily enough, the speaker can have to do more to say less. People often go out of their way to express themselves in ways that are less than completely forthcoming and may employ several rhetorical devices to efficiently reduce the content of what they say.

The use of an attenuated proposition may cause an understatement. Ironically, since attenuators exist only where they reduce what is said, they frequently give rise to an inference that more is said by a speaker. For example, the use of the "exactly +NP" attenuating negative polarity object strongly implies understatement, i.e. the superficially conflicting negation, for example:

Eg: Patrolling the Ku-dam in the heart of West Berlin isn't exactly a hardship.

"Patrolling in the previous example sounds like not just a non-hardship, but something of a pleasure (Israel, 2008: 10).

This kind of negative irony involves a kind of implicature in which a superficially weak contradictory word is used to express a stronger opposite meaning: this is what Horn (1989) called "contraries in contradictory clothing" Implications such as this appear to in certain cases become a natural assumption, so it is perhaps not unusual that only a given class of superficially attenuating constructs seem to tend to be a natural inference.

The following constructions, for example, simply represent an extreme scalar attribute and are used in denials to indicate an attribute at the reverse end of the scale. (*ibid.*:11).

VP Construction	Denies	Implicate
Grow on trees	Be very common	Be quite rare
Be skin off one's nose	Be a big problem	Be no problem
Be born yesterday	Be very naïve	Be quite savvy
Be something to sneeze at	Be trivial	Be significant

Both of these constructions are strong artifacts of negative polarity; they are permitted, particularly negative constructions. Such constraints tend to highlight the fact that only in the context of any form of rejection can their associated implications occur. It is worth noting that within these constructions, one sees both evaluative positive and negative predicates. That is, "great shakes," or "lighting the Thames on fire" will be a positive idea.

Elaf&Hussien (2020) It is not desirable, at least not in the logic of these idioms of common sense, to have been "born yesterday" or to have lost the "skin off one's nose" In the other hand, although it is possible to conventionalize both positive and negative evaluative predicates as understaters of negative polarity goods, they may not be equally likely to do so, and it seems that the evaluative - positive-negative polarity items here are the ones of which the negative polarity items are the understated implicatures are thought most deeply and are most likely to be conventionalized. Therefore, while the inference from "not the brightest bulb" to "really quite stupid" seems to be quite solid, the inference from "not born yesterday" to "really quite savvy" seems to be a little more tenuous. While the former is reliably insulting, the latter seems to be less than open (Horn, 1989: 353-355). Understatement is only possible because speakers often say and mean very little to both. In this way, understatement relies on a more general tendency, or semantic weakening, of attenuation. Funnily enough, however, a speaker can have to do more to say less .

Lakoff (1973) states that People often express themselves in ways that are less than entirely forthcoming, and to do so they may use language devices that reduce the substance of what they say effectively. While Israel said that (2006: 143) claims understatement is "conspicuously less informative than some other states".

According to Wikipedia, however, the understanding of understatement can depend on context, including cultural context, it can also depend on speech intonation; the word "not bad" can be said, for instance, in a way that implies everything from "mediocre" to "excellent". A sentence such as It is better than nothing.

Depending on the sense in which it is conveyed, it may both convey an incredibly positive meaning and apply to somewhere in the middle field, Which is quite a striking case of understatement. The offer to help him With a \$100 bill will evoke. This utterance in a situation where a person needs \$1000, and then the message is well, it's not exactly what I wanted, but it's at least something". But if a person wins \$1000000 in a lottery, the same sentence can be used (with the help of understatement or conventionalized irony)"It is an enormous amount of money" to express the sense. A sentence, moreover, such as the previous His efficiency was less than ideal.

The behavior of the subject can be used to criticize both moderately "it was rather good" and seriously "it was terrible".

2.1.2 Pragmatic perspectives of Understatement

Some scholars have argued that understatement in decontextualized contexts should not be observed, it must be explored within the pragmatic discipline, which is usually described as the study of "meaning in interaction" (Thomas,1995: 22).The fact that understatements are syntactically and semantically flawless;is illustrated by Norrick (1982: 168); they only appear peculiar in context. As a result, he tends to refer to the word "contextual" figure.

Similarly, the trope is characterized as a semantic-pragmatic mechanism (Ravazzoli ,1978: 70). He points out that one should not diminish objects or ideas without confronting them with those from which monotonic meaning can be extracted by lexical translation while contemplating the semantic mechanism or shift in meaning involving understatement.Hence, for Ravazzoli, understatement is typically a referential trope since it cannot be recognized without resorting to its referent.

In order to assess whether an argument should be understated or not, Kreuz (1998: 96-7) emphasized the value of global awareness. This encourages him to illustrate that what is understatement in one case can be non-understatement in another, so a listener must be alert to these variations. Although script and schematic awareness lets listeners make sense of literal sentences in helping to distinguish non-veridical or non-literal statements, this knowledge plays an even greater role. Global awareness helps audiences to better recognize figurative statements and to provide more clarity over these meanings.The main idea behind understatement is violating the co-operative maxims as what will be explained in the next section (Elaf&Hussien 2020) .

2.1.2.1 Grice Co-operative Principle and Understatement

From a pragmatic standpoint, language philosophers have centered on the interpretation of understatement. Grice's (1975) cooperative theory, where understanding is a matter of inference from what is said to what is meant, has been extremely influential. Indeed, the most influential ideas about trope understanding come from his theory of conversational implicature.

Grice (1975: 45) states that speech exchange when partners normally operate under the premise that certain rules of conversation are followed. His definition of cooperative communication is as follows: "make your contribution such as is required, at the stages in which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged". In turn, the principle falls into four maxims, namely quantity, quality, relation and manner, according to which speakers must speak informatively, truthfully, with relevance clearly and unequivocally, respectively.He explained them as follows:

Maxim of quality

- Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 1. Do not say what you believe is false.
 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of relation (or relevance)

Be relevant.

Maxim of manner

- Be perspicuous.
 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 4. Be orderly.

Yet he finds that there are times and situations under which the maxims are not followed by the speakers. One response is to allow listeners to pursue another degree of understanding, for the purpose of generating a conversational implicature.

Non-literal language types reflect departures from the theory of normal communication in Grice (ibid.: 25), coming under the category of "examples that involve exploitation, that is, a procedure by which a maxim is flouted for the purpose of getting in conversational implicature by means of something of the nature of a figure of speech"

Dascal and Gross (1999: 122) state that the figure of speech of understatement is urge of inference since speakers urge addressees to seek an implicature beyond the straightforward literal interpretation of what is said.

Gibbs (1994: 392) remarks that understatement is traditionally viewed as a violate of Grice's maxim of quantity (i.e. contribute as much to the conversation as is required).

Bach and Harnish (1979: 66) prove that one purports, through understatement, to say what is much less than one wants to claim. Since understatements are valid if what is supposed to be expressed is true, recognition of speaker's communicative intention cannot depend on saying something a speaker obviously does not believe, and so they do not violate.

The conversational presumption of sincerity-one has told the truth. Rather, one has not told the whole truth and so has violated the presumption of quantity as in:

- It's OK (Good)
- Not bad !(Very good! Great!)
- He's getting by.(He's doing well)

Of course, the disproportion inherent in an understatement creates contrast with reality. Understated utterances display a difference between the state of affairs shown in the utterance and the current state of affairs, between the context of the comments' semantic or "utterance meaning of the comments and the referent situation. (Colston and O'Brien, 2000: 19)

in the study of non-literal words, Fogelin (1988: 16) refers to this contrast in defining understatement as a 'opposing figure of speech' because 'the speaker says something mutually known to be in need of correction.' The mode of corrective judgement gives the indirect substance of this figure of expression. Fogelin describes this succinctly (ibid.: 14):

In understatement I say something weaker than I am in a position to say; for example, I say that someone has had something to drink when; in fact he is utterly intoxicated. The corrective judgment goes: "what do you mean he has had something to drink? He's plastered". My remark counts as understatement when it is mutually recognized that I have spoken with the intention of invoking this corrective judgment...my impression is that people will call something understatement if it invokes a mutually recognized corrective judgment towards the extreme(on the scale). Understatement invites a strengthening correction.

2.1.2.2 Understatement and Politeness

Harris (2008:6) indicates that understatement can be used as a tool for politeness modesty and tactfulness.

An understatement of truth will help him escape the allegation of egotism on the one side and self-interested puffery on the other, if the speaker portrays his own success, and sometimes when he merely defines his own role. As Samuel Johnson puts it, people are much more happy to see something better than expected rather than less than promised "it is more pleasing to see smoke brightening into flame, than flame sinking into smoke". And it goes without saying that a person modest of his own talent wins the other's admiration more easily than egotist .Thus an expert geologist might say " know a little about rocks", rather than "I'm an expert about rocks".Consider the following :

- .Actually, I'm rather good at crossword puzzles.
- We're rather proud of our classless profession.

It can also be seen that understatement is a way to underplay features of meaning that are pragmatically disadvantaged. It is impolite that it is mitigated in the up mentioned cases of modest self-praise (Leech, 1983: 148).

3.Data analysis

The data of the study is taken from Trump's and Biden's second presidential 2020 debates. (The debate was moderated by Kristen Welker of NBC News on October 22, 2020 in Nashville, Tennessee.). The researcher has selected certain extracts that contain understatement to be analyzed semantically and pragmatically.

Extract 1:

Donald Trump: We have a problem that's a worldwide problem. This is a worldwide problem, but **I've been congratulated by the heads of many countries on what we've been able to do.**

In this extract the speaker is trying to understate his utterance, semantically, by being not informative enough to talk about what he did or able to do. Pragmatically he violates the quantity in a way he avoids presenting enough information to declare his intended meaning, and the manner maxims in a way that he avoids being clear and exact. More over such a way of expressing indicates a polite intention to be modest

Extract 2:

Joe Biden: **And we're in a circumstance where the president thus far and still has no plan, no comprehensive plan.**

The speaker in this extract understates his criticizing towards the addressee by being uninformative for the sake of eliminating being direct. The quantity and the manner maxims also have been violated for maintaining understatement and being more polite rather than addressing the intended one directly, so the speaker uses such expression (far, has no plan, no comprehensive plan) instead of saying the addressee failed or unsuccessful.

Extract 3:

Kristen Welker: President Trump, I'd like to follow up with you and your comments. You talked about taking a therapeutic, I assume you're referencing Regeneron. You also said a vaccine will be coming within weeks. **Is that a guarantee?**

This extract is understated, as the speaker behaves uninformatively in order to be more aware and polite when addressing the one who is the president. So instead of saying for example "are you sure?" he instead said "Is that a guarantee?" to eliminate being direct, therefore, he violated the quantity and the manner maxims for the sake of being more polite and avoid using the exact word to express his intended intention.

Extract 4:

Kristen Welker: Let me follow up with you and because this is new information. You have set a vaccine is coming soon within weeks now. Your own officials say, "It could take well into 2021 at the earliest for enough Americans to get vaccinated." And even then they say, "The country will be wearing masks and distancing into 2022." **Is your timeline realistic?**

Again, the speaker behaving indirectly and uninformatively when talking to the president, as he asked "Is your timeline realistic?" instead of addressing him by saying for example "are you planning accurately". So violating the manner and the quantity maxims leads to such understated expression.

Extract 5:

Joe Biden: And by the way, this is the same fellow who told you, “This is going to end by Easter” last time. This is the same fellow who told you that, “Don’t worry, we’re going to end this by the summer.” We’re about to go into a dark winter, a dark winter and he has no clear plan. And there’s no prospect that there’s going to be a vaccine available for the majority of the American people before the middle of next year .

Understatement is heavily used in this extract , it is clear that the way the speaker addressing the intended one is indirect by saying " fellow", " he has no clear plan", " And there’s no prospect" these expressions are used instead of being direct and saying for example " you are not telling the truth" or " you are unsuccessful president"... etc. Quantity and manner have been violated to maintain politeness and produce understated sentences.

Extract 6:

Joe Biden: **Simply not true.** We ought to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. We ought to be able to safely open, but they need resources to open?

Alakrash & Bustan (2020) This extract begins with understated expression which is " : Simply not true" , the speaker says so to understate his direct intention for keeping politeness, so he uses negated declarative phrase instead of saying the declarative positive one " it is wrong" or " it is false" since the latter would be less polite and more informative. Violation has been made to quantity and manner maxims.

4. Conclusion

1. Understatement is used in American debates , as it is clearly showed through the analysis of the selected data. In the selected American debates , the main purpose behind understatement is for the sake of being more polite and less direct in addressing the other person to behave in an acceptable way in front of the audience, also for the sake of being modest , but the latter was so rarely used. The most frequent way that is used to understate in the selected American debates is using uninformative expression reflecting the indirectness of the addresser by violating the maxims of manner and quality .

References

Alakrash, H. M., & Bustan, E. S. (2020). Politeness Strategies Employed by Arab EFL And Malaysian ESL Students in Making Request. *Social Sciences*, 10(6), 10-20.

Alakrash, HM, Razak, NA, & Bustan, ES (2020). The Effectiveness Of Employing Telegram Application In Teaching Vocabulary: A Quasai Experimental Study. *Multicultural Education*, 6(1).

Bacha and Harnish (1979) *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts* .Cambridge: Cambridge University, Press.

Dascal, M . and A.G. Gross(1999). The Marriage of pragmatics and Rhetoric ". *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32: 107.30.

Elaf, B., & Hussien, A. (2020). An analysis of impoliteness strategies performed by Donald Trump tweets addressing the middle east countries. *Global journal of Social Science and Humanities*, 1, 66-74

Elaf, B., & Hussien, A. (2020). Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's Tweets Addressing the Middle Eastern Countries. *International Journal of Future Generation Communication and Networking*, 13(2), 26-38.

Farese, G. M. (2018). *The coural semantics of address practices: A contrastive study between English and Italian*. Lanham: Lexington.

Flogelin, R. J. (1988) *Figuratively speaking* Yale, University Press.

Fox, Kate (2004) *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. London: Hodder & Stoughton .

Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind : Figurative Thought*. Language and Understanding Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grice, H.P. (1975). "Logic and Conversation". In Cole P. and J. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics Vol. 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, 41-58. 14.

Harris, Leslie A. 1988. Litotes and superlative in Beowulf. *English Studies* 69 (1), 1–11.

Harris, R.A. (2008) .A, Handbook, of ,Rhetorical Devices. URL: <http://www.Virtualsalt.com>. 15.

Horn, Laurence R. 1989. *A Natural History of Negation*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

<https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-joe-biden-final-presidential-debate-transcript-2020>

Israel, M. (2008). "Saying Less and Meaning Less". Maryland: University Of Maryland.

Kreuz, R.J. (1998). "The Use of Exaggeration in Discourse: Cognitive and Social Facets". In Fussell, S. R. (ed.) *Social and Cognitive Approaches to Interpersonal Communication*. Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum.

Lakoff, Robin. 1973. "The logic of politeness; or, minding your p's and q's." *CLS* 9. 149-62.

Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

Norrick, N.R. (2005). "On the Semantics of Overstatement and Understatement URL: <http://www.usingenglish.com>.