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That's the understatement of the century: Understatement as a meta-rhetorical expression in the Corpus of American Soap Operas

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of the meta-rhetorical expression (MRE) *understatement* in the Corpus of American Soap Operas. The high frequency of the nominal form shows (fictional) speakers' and script-writers' awareness of and active engagement with the rhetorical concept. There are a minority of self-directed (the speaker's own utterance) versus a majority of other-directed uses (somebody else's utterance). MRE comments are to a large extent realised by a restricted number of five patterns, and show a narrow range of common modifying collocates, both of which may show conventionalized usage. The function of the MREs is to mark the utterance targeted as semantically too weak and to imply or explicitly provide a stronger version of it. Thus they show a critical and challenging attitude vis-à-vis the target statement and, in the case of other-directed instances, the other speaker.

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1. Introduction

Concepts like metaphor, irony, hyperbole and litotes have a long history as technical, second-order entities extending from classical rhetoric to modern pragmatics. They describe actual language behaviour that may be pervasive (e.g. metaphor), or fairly frequent (e.g. hyperbole, cf. [McCarthy and Carter 2004](#)), so much so that there are conventionalized items such as the ironic phrase *big deal* (OED sense 2b). While actual usage has been given ample attention, the use of the 'technical' labels by lay users has so far only been investigated for irony/sarcasm ([Barbe 1995](#); [Taylor 2016](#)) or hyperbole ([Claridge 2011](#)). Uses like "it is ironic that ...", "it is not hyperbole to call it ...", or "metaphorically speaking" are instances of metacommunication, that is, communication about aspects of the ongoing communication ([Hübler 2011:108](#)). The lexical items employed as labels (e.g. *hyperbole*) allow insights into speakers' metapragmatic knowledge ([Hübler 2011:120](#)) and, through the comments they are found in, into common everyday attitudes to such uses ([Culpeper 2011:74](#)). The awareness shown by participants about the language used in their interactions is the focus of the field of metapragmatics ([Haugh 2018:619](#)).

Understatement is an interesting case for a metapragmatic study, as the term seems to be of interest to speakers witnessed by its steep rises in Google Books in the 20th and 21st centuries, outpacing the items *overstatement*/*hyperbole* ([Claridge 2024: 16](#)), and as it is a term more used in everyday than academic use. In the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) ([Davies, 2008](#)) *understatement* is least frequent in the academic register and most frequent in blogs, followed by magazines. Its

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ordinariness is further underlined by its remarkable frequency in the Corpus of American Soap Operas (SOAP; 5.38 per one million words).

This study investigates metapragmatic usage of *understatement* in SOAP (Davies, 2011), i.e. their forms and uses in interactive contexts. After brief elucidations of understatement as an instance of non-literal language use or a trope (Section 2) and metapragmatic uses (Section 3), Section 4 will introduce the data and corpuslinguistic methodology in more detail. The results are presented and discussed in Section 5, while Section 6 concludes.

2. Understatement

As metalinguistic or metapragmatic uses say something about the concept as such, it is necessary to briefly deal with what is already known or assumed about the concept of understatement. A non-linguistic view is provided by Fox (2004), an anthropologist watching her own 'tribe', the English, and describing their rules of behaviour. One of those is what she calls the 'understatement rule' (2004: 66–68), among whose description are the following aspects: "it is a restrained, refined, subtle form of humour" (67), it consists of "feign[ed] dry, deadpan indifference" (66), and it is so often used because of the English "strict prohibitions on earnestness, gushing, emoting and boasting" (66). Two of her understatement examples are "well, not exactly what I would have chosen" for a truly horrific experience and "a bit too hot for my taste" applied to the Sahara (67). Fox's description can be taken as an instance of a first-order view – albeit of the British, not the American speech community.

A linguistic approach that is close to a first-order perspective is Wierzbicka (2006), who points out that seen from an outside perspective (e.g. Syrian, German and Hungarian views) Anglo, but specifically British English speech practices are characterized by pervasive understatement (2006: 28). In her words, understatement is about

expressing oneself in such a way that one's words say less than what one wants to say with these words. What is seen as important is that people should not *overstate*—that is, should not exaggerate—rather than they should not *understate* what they really want to communicate. (2006: 28)

Thus, what one says should not say more than what one wants to be responsible for (2006: 34) – understatement as an avoidance strategy, so to speak. The wealth of all sorts of downtoners (e.g. *rather, moderately, somewhat, a bit, basically*) and of phrases like *not exactly*, as well as their rise in (Late) Modern English, are seen in connection with the proneness to understatement (2006: 29–34; see also the related 19th-century rise of indirectness noted by Culpeper and Demmen, 2011). No remarks on understatement in American English have been found, but there is a passage in the popular writing manual by Strunk and White (1999) that resonates with both Fox and Wierzbicka. Among their stylistic caveats in Section IV one finds "7. Do not overstate", as such use "diminishes the whole" and makes the reader "los[e] confidence in your judgment or your poise."

Linguistic investigations of understatement in English, also found under the terms *litotes* (Harris 1988) and *meiosis* (Walton 2017), are very rare. The only extant monograph on the topic is outdated (Wärtli 1935), and understatement is often researched in combination with other phenomena, such as overstatement (Spitzbardt 1963; Colston 1997), irony (Colston 1997; Liggins 1981), hedging (Hübler 1983), and negation (Mönkkönen 2012, cf. also Horn 1989). What is completely missing so far is an empirical survey of the realisations and uses of understatement in modern English. A recent linguistic-pragmatic treatment in German linguistics (Neuhaus 2016: 128) defines understatement by two conditions: (a) "what is said is a scaling downward from what is expectable (from the context)" and (b) "what is meant is more than the default, i.e., more than what usually would have been expected". Related to condition (a), Walton points out that "Understatement is often the figure of choice when the point the speaker means to be making (...) is *obvious*, when her *addressees know already that it is* so even if they need reminding, or *can easily discover for themselves that it is*" (Walton 2017: 109, my emphasis). According to this, it might be hard to recognize instances of understatement if one does not share sufficient common ground with the speaker. All understatement formulations are based on mitigation (e.g. using the downtoners mentioned above), which on its own does not fulfil condition (b), so that a clear contextual contrast and/or sufficient common ground is necessary to transform such a form into an understatement. Neuhaus' condition (b) covers one of the two types of understatement recognized in previous literature, namely the emphatic type that intensifies the intended meaning, e.g. *not bad* used to actually mean 'excellent'. The other type is the restrictive kind, which is based on modesty and emotional detachment and may downplay the effect of a statement, e.g., by calling a hot curry *mildly hot*. Its use tries to make a statement more acceptable to the recipient through its overtly reduced emotionality (Hübler 1983: 23).

3. A metapragmatic approach to understatement

A metapragmatic approach to understatement is essentially a first-order approach, as it tries to tap into lay people's understanding and negotiation of this linguistic behaviour. It typically takes as its starting point metalinguistic expressions (Culpeper 2011:74) used in natural, non-technical language interaction. For the concept understatement these are words such as *understatement, understate, understated*, while more technical terms like *litotes* are less likely in everyday use. Metalinguistic expressions may occur in metapragmatic comments, which are "opinion[s] about the pragmatic implications of utterances, their functions, indexical relations, social implications" (Culpeper 2011:74, 100). More precisely, such comments can be used to "influence and negotiate how an utterance is or should have been heard, or try to modify the values attributed to it" (Jaworski et al. 2004: 4, cf. also Hübler and Bublitz, 2007: 18). For example, when a speaker says about another's

utterance “They were probably growing a little bit too fast” that this “may be an understatement” (COCA SPOK, 2019) they are trying to modify the value indicated by the predication to something more than “a little bit”. In a sense, metapragmatic comments may ensure mutual understanding or prevent misunderstandings.

Focusing on metalinguistic expressions or lexicon, Haugh (2018: 624) distinguishes three types, namely referring to (i) pragmatic acts and activities (e.g. *apologise*), (ii) inferential acts and activities (e.g. *allude*, *imply*), and (iii) evaluative acts and activities (e.g. *aggressive*, *polite*). Metapragmatic approaches based on (i) can be illustrated by studies on speech acts such as Jucker and Taavitsainen (2014) on complimenting or Schneider (2017), who introduced the term meta-illocutionary expression for, e.g., *apologize*, *apology* (MIE). Research into more complex constructs such as (im)politeness (Culpeper 2011) or hypocrisy (Sorlin and Virtanen, 2024) fall into type (iii). *Understatement*, *overstatement*, *irony/sarcasm*, and *metaphor* belong to type (ii), as the meaning in each case is an implicature that needs to be inferred. Metalinguistic expressions of types (i) and (ii) are similar in that both predominantly refer to acts realized on the level of a single utterance. Based on this similarity I will apply the term meta-rhetorical expression (MRE), parallel to MIE, to such terms (of all word classes) for non-literal uses within type (ii).

MREs and their use in metapragmatic commentary have been studied by Barbe (1995) (‘explicit irony’), Claridge (2011) (‘explicit hyperbole’) and Taylor (2016) (metalinguistic uses of irony/sarcasm). The usage Barbe identified in letters to the editor does not refer to individual verbal acts, but to so-called irony of the situation (also noted as a highly frequent use by Taylor (2016: 118)). This is shown in Barbe’s example (3) (1995: 134) “Doesn’t anyone find it ironic that those who cling so tightly to freedom of speech are the first to deny others that right as in the case Oak Lawn Trustee J.V.?” where the general upholding of a right is juxtaposed to its incongruous violation in a specific case. Both Taylor and Claridge focused on MREs in metapragmatic comments that target verbal behaviour.

Claridge (2011: 118) lists nine realisations of MREs occurring in BNC1994 involving *hyperbole*, *overstatement* and *exaggeration* (as N, Adj, Adv, V), which involve the latter two terms to a greater extent. The nine types can be condensed to these four functions:

- (i) Licensing: something that sounds like hyperbole is classified as literally correct
- (ii) Downtoning: the MRE-based discussion has a slight downtoning effect, while some hyperbolic force is retained
- (iii) Contradiction/denial: a hyperbole is deemed inapplicable
- (iv) Criticism/Challenge: critical discussion and potential modification of the hyperbole (short of outright denial)

While all of these are overwhelmingly attested in writing and thus often refer to the writers’ own use, types (i) and (iv) are also found in spoken interactions. Taylor (2016: 109–125), using internet forum data, investigated co-occurrences of *ironic/sarcastic* with (im)politeness terms, reference to speaker, addressee or third person as well as to ongoing interaction, other interaction or general personality, and (un)favourable evaluation. In brief, addressees are targeted the least, unfavourable evaluations are more likely with speaker and third-party reference and with *sarcastic*, and speaker/addressee targeted instances refer most to the ongoing interaction, while third-person sarcastic references often indicate personality.

MREs and MIEs share another similarity besides having utterance-based targets (as mentioned above), namely the fact MIEs may also target non-literal forms (indirect speech acts). Thus their functions may also be of interest. Schneider (2017: 239) lists four functions with their most prototypical formal realizations:

- a) Performative (performing a particular speech act) – declarative with 1st ps. sg. present of meta-illocutionary verb
- b) Reporting (communicating that a particular speech act was performed) – declarative with 3rd ps. sg. past of meta-illocutionary verb
- c) Commenting (clarifying the illocution of one’s own speech act) – declaratives with juxtaposition of two meta-illocutionary verbs in 1st ps. sg. present progressive, the first negated
- d) Problematizing (questioning (the legitimacy of) the interlocutor’s illocution) – Yes/No question with meta-illocutionary noun

Functions (c) and (d) have affinities to Claridge’s functions (ii), (iii) and (iv) and also generally to evaluation as treated by Taylor. Commonly, as in (d), the stance of the metapragmatic acts is critical (Hübler 2011: 110), but many functions are possible. Hübler and Bublitz (2007: 18) list interpersonal functions (conflictual/face-threatening, affiliative, expressive) and instrumentalized functions (reinforcing communicative norms, constructing identities). The difference in realisations found for MIEs may also be of interest for MREs, as different lexical forms may be used in different clause types and the latter in different frequencies; Schneider (2017), for example, found frequent use of interrogatives. Hübler (2011: 111) pointed to the occurrence of modalized (e.g. *maybe*, *I think*) and of abbreviated comments, as well as to their position (following or preceding the target utterance).

Focusing on the item *understatement* (cf. Section 4), this study will investigate whose utterance is commented on by the MRE, the forms of the MRE comments (clause types, modalizing or modifying elements, typical patterns), as well as the evaluations and targets indicated by the understatement, which are partly carried over into the MRE comment. The interactional functions hinted at by these features are further explored, but a full functional analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

4. Data and methodology

This study investigates the use of the metalinguistic expression or MRE *understatement* in the SOAP corpus, both of which choices need some justification. As Table 1 shows, the nominal form *understatement* is by far the most common in COCA and SOAP.

Table 1
Frequencies of the lexical group of *understatement* (raw and per 1 million words; based on figures provided by english-corpora.org).

	COCA	SOAP
<i>Understatement</i>	2328 (2.34)	538 (5.38)
<i>Understate</i>	430 (0.43)	3 (0.03)
<i>Understated</i>	1930 (1.94)	45 (0.45)
<i>Understating</i>	176 (0.18)	7 (0.07)
<i>Understatedly</i>	9 (0.01)	–

Understated as the second most-frequent in COCA is due mostly to its high use in magazines (551 occurrences), where it refers to understated fashion choices. Across COCA, *understated* + collocating NOUN yields *elegance, way, style, look, performance, manner, fashion* in top positions, while *comment* follows in position 21 with four occurrences and only 18 of 453 collocates involve a language-related term. *Understatement* thus seemed the most promising item for finding MREs. Preferring SOAP over COCA is due to the fact that COCA yields only 278 instances (2.20 per million words) in spoken contexts, all of which represent public broadcast language. Further exploratory searches in the Santa Barbara Corpus (SBC) and the BNC1994 and 2014 showed very few occurrences in authentic spoken contexts (SBC and BNC2014 1 each, and BNC1994 3). SOAP, in contrast, offered the opportunity to study *understatement* MREs in dialogue that pretends to be natural everyday spoken interaction. TV dialogue, while clearly fictional, needs to be realistic enough to be acceptable and believable for the audience and achieves this by selective imitation of spoken-language features (Bednarek 2017: 147). The latter point may be illustrated to some extent by the list of more informal words and phrases in SOAP (vs. COCA, BNC) provided by Davies on english-corpora.org/soap. Bednarek (2017: 132) lists nine other functions besides adherence to realism that TV dialogue can fulfil, of which character revelation (personal traits and interpersonal relationships) (136–137) and exploitation of language for humour or irony (138–139) as more fiction-related uses may very well play a role in *understatement* MREs. While TV language is ultimately directed to the audience, the characters in the first instance talk to each other in the fictional world (Bednarek 2017: 131). It is the character-level interaction that will be the focus of the analysis, not the audience-directed dramatic effects.

The SOAP corpus, available on english-corpora.org, contains scripts of ten US-American soap operas from the period 2001 to 2012. Table 2 presents an overview of the coverage and the word counts.

Table 2
The SOAP corpus (based on information on english-corpora.org).

Soaps	Years	Words
<i>All my Children</i> (AMC)	2001–11	12,496,621
<i>As the World Turns</i> (ATWT)	2001–10	12,386,877
<i>Days of our Lives</i> (DAYS)	All	12,683,052
<i>General Hospital</i> (GH)	All	14,081,306
<i>Guiding Light</i> (GL)	2001–9	8,610,549
<i>One Life to Live</i> (OLTL)	All	12,511,850
<i>Passions</i> (PASS)	2001–7	6,984,371
<i>Port Charles</i> (PC)	2001–3	1,816,022
<i>The Bold and the Beautiful</i> (B&B)	All	6,268,170
<i>The Young and Restless</i> (Y&R)	All	12,945,082
Total	-	100,783,900

Many soaps are long-standing and very popular, e.g. running from 1963 (GH), 1965 (DAYS), 1968 (OLTL), or 1970 (AMC). The stories usually center around interlinked families, often combining characters from somewhat different social strata and ethnic backgrounds. The settings are geographically diverse, e.g. Illinois (DAYS), Philadelphia region (AMC), Los Angeles (B&B), or New York State (PC). Most of them originate from different writing teams, although there are some overlaps among the 47 writers involved in the ten soaps in the time span covered here. For instance, James E. Reilley was a prominent writer for DAYS and PASS, while Kay Alden was important for both B&B and Y&R; other writers contributing to as many as three shows are David Kreizman (AMC, ATWT, GL) and Hogan Sheffer (ATWT, DAYS, Y&R). Despite the generic unity of the corpus, the database thus seems to show some internal diversity.

The corpus analysis will proceed along both quantitative and qualitative lines. Retrieving *understatement* from SOAP yields the picture shown in Table 3, ordering the soaps by descending frequency.

Table 3
The MRE *understatement* in the ten soaps.

Soap	Occurrences	Per 1 million words
Y&R	99	7.65
DAYS	87	7.03
B&B	41	6.54
GH	85	6.18
AMC	60	4.80
PASS	30	4.29
OLTL	51	4.08
ATWT	44	3.55
PC	6	3.39
GL	25	2.90
Corpus total	528	5.24

The figures in Table 3 are based on a manual investigation of all concordance lines drawing on the larger context (c. 7–8 lines) english-corpora.org provides, during which two non-applicable examples referring to the choice of a drink and an advertising strategy were removed, one each from ATWT and B&B.¹ The instances' formal and interactional characteristics to be used in the analysis were classified in Excel spreadsheets. The characteristics covered are partly based on aspects covered in previous literature (cf. Section 3), i.e. clause type (including tag questions), presence of modal or modulating elements (e.g. pragmatic markers), reference to utterance by self, addressee or other, evaluation and referent of the understatement commented on, and the function of the metapragmatic comment. Additionally, two further aspects of interest, namely pre- and postmodifications of *understatement* as well as typical comment patterns, arose inductively out of the data. Except for functions, which will be discussed qualitatively, quantitative data will be provided for all other aspects.

5. Results and discussion

Section 5.1 provides a general overview of the main patterns found in the data, in mostly quantitative terms. The following sections will focus in on specific interactions with a qualitative analysis, subdivided by whether the targeted understatement is by the speaker (5.2) or by somebody else (5.3).

5.1. Formal realisations of MRE comments

Examples (1)–(4) give a first impression of the range of contexts in which the MRE *understatement* appears.

- (1) Kate: And Bonnie – I mean, her mother – I think **calling her flighty is a vast understatement**, don't you think?
 Rex: Okay, wait, wait, wait. (...) secondly, Bonnie – yeah, I mean, she – she might be, you know, a little fun-loving, but aside from that, she is a cool lady with a heart of gold. (DAYS, 2004)
- (2) Siren: She just makes me feel so bad, like I'm not normal or something. I admit I'm different.
 Tabitha: **Can you pronounce the word “understatement”?** (PASS, 2006)
- (3) Larry: Look, I know you're not a big fan of Mac's.
 Jill: **What a huge understatement that is.** (Y&R 2002)
- (4) Bianca: And they were unprepared.
 Zarf: **Understatement of the century.** (AMC, 2006)

While all examples are clearly dialogic, only the understatement MREs in (2)–(4) refer to the previous utterance of another speaker, which is classified as 'understatement' by the comment. In (3), for example, it relates to *not a big fan of Mac's*, implying that indeed the person rather 'dislikes Mac'. The MRE in (1), in contrast, refers within the utterance of one and the same speaker and is used to characterize parts of this utterance, here the epithet *flighty*. Both kinds of uses clearly negotiate applicable and appropriate meanings, but the other-directed ones have probably more pronounced politeness implications. This applies in particular, if the targeted utterance is about the previous speaker themselves, as in (2). Interestingly, other-directed uses like (2)–(4) (447 instances) dominate by far over self-directed uses like (1) (78), that is, by 84.6 % versus 14.8 %. While these figures cover utterance-related cases as in (1) to (4), the remaining three occurrences evaluate a person as

¹ This and the fact that english-corpora.org removes duplicates in the concordances without adjusting the overall figures leads to the figures in Table 3 not being identical to the figures on the site (as given in Table 1).

such as prone to understatement. In (5), it is not a statement being directly negotiated in situ, but the fact that the other speaker might not be trustworthy due to their speech habits.

- (5) Olivia: I guess I needed to see with my own eyes that you were all right.
 Johnny: I told you that I was.
 Olivia: Yeah. Yeah, but **you've got a real skill for understatement**, you know? Especially as it applies to your own personal safety. (GH, 2010)

The overwhelming tendency to label other people's speech (habits) is remarkable.

Regarding clause type, the MRE comments above are declarative (1, 5), interrogative (2) and exclamative (3). Example (4) is a non-clausal fragment. (1) also contains a question tag (*don't you think*), which commonly occurs with declaratives but also with fragments. Question tags include the classical grammatical tags (e.g. *isn't it*), invariant types (e.g. *right, huh*) and other forms as in (1, 5). The quantitative distribution in the data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4
 Distribution of MRE comments across clause types (question tags co-occur with one of the other options).

	Declarative	Interrogative	Exclamative	Fragment	Question tag
Instances	474	7	2	45	23
Percent	89.8	1.3	0.4	8.5	4.3

What is striking is the tiny incidence of interrogatives, a prominent form for MIEs (Schneider 2017), and the prevalence of declarative and similar forms. The presence of understatement is apparently not questioned in an open-minded manner (Is it there? Is it not there?) but stated as a fact. In conjunction with the above observation of other-directedness this may lead to the assumption of a fairly confrontational use. At least the bluntness of many declaratives goes in the same direction; completely unmodulated *That's/is an understatement* and *There's an understatement* are common. These are part of a small number of recurrent syntactic patterns in the data, which make up as much as 64 percent (bare) or 90 percent (including modified types) of the data (Table 5).

Table 5
 MRE comment patterns.

Patterns	Bare		Bare + modified	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
A. <i>That BE an understatement.</i>	245	46.4	338	64
B. <i>There's an understatement.</i>	21	4	28	5.3
C. <i>Understatement.</i>	21	4	33	6.2
D. <i>X BE an understatement.</i>	33	6.2	39	7.4
E. <i>SAY X BE an understatement ...</i>	20	3.9	38	7.2

(BE: simple and modalized forms, X: the expression identified as understatement).

While patterns D-E mention and thus highlight the supposedly understated expression, patterns A-C leave its identification to be inferred by the interlocutor and the audience. In A-C the understatement will have preceded the MRE comment (cf. Hübler 2011: 111). SAY includes all forms of the lexemes *say* (cf. (6–7)), *call* (cf. (1)) and *tell*. It is striking that among the many declarative formulations that are possible in principle, such curt, categorial forms (A-B) are used, and that pattern A dominates to such a great extent. Alternations of the basic patterns, namely by pre- and postmodifications of the MRE *understatement*, are included in the right-hand columns of Table 5.

Such alternations of the basic patterns and also of the remaining realisations will have an effect on the overall interactional impact of the comment. Tables 6 and 7 show their frequencies. Modal elements and pragmatic markers in Table 6 share the characteristic that they reveal a speaker perspective on the content and the interaction. Modal elements are all types that deal

Table 6
 Presence of a modal element or a pragmatic marker.

	Modal element	Pragmatic marker
Instances	79	162
Percent	14.7	30.2

with (un)certainty, possibility, likelihood, i.e. typically modal verbs (*would* in (6) and (7)), adverbs (*possibly* in (7)) and epistemic phrases (e.g. *I think* in (1)). Pragmatic markers are communicative signals, such as of a dispreferred response (*well* in (6)) or, of assuring the attention of the addressee (*look* in (7)).

(6) Well, saying this is a surprise would be **an understatement**. (DAYS, 2008)

(7) Look, to say that things are complicated would possibly be the **understatement of the year**, but you need Bree. (OLTL, 2006)

Pragmatic markers always occur clause-initially (with two exceptions) and sometimes occur in pairs and three-somes (in which case they have been counted as one instance, i.e. per utterance, in Table 6). The most common marker is *well*, usually indicating a dispreferred answer. The full list of markers used is *well* 64, *yeah* 46, *oh* 33, *now* 15, *huh* (and variants) 6, *boy* 6, *actually* 6, *hmm* (and variants) 4, *you know* 3, *in fact* 2, *I mean* 2, *ok* 2, *hell* 1, *ha* 1, *pfft* 1, *hello* 1, *God* 1, and *all right* 1. Some of them have mitigating and affiliative potential (e.g. *yeah*, *I mean*), while others are more confrontational in nature, such as *now*, *hell*. Their presence in almost a third of all cases is certainly remarkable.

The strength of the utterance will also be affected by pre- and postmodification of *understatement* and the specific types used; usually these do not occur in tandem. Table 7 shows that modification is present in about 27 percent of the data.

Table 7
Modification of *understatement*.

	Premodified	Postmodified
Instances	71	76
Percent	13.2	14.2

The effects may be downtoning or upgrading the force of the assessment by the MRE. The postmodifiers are of the type of the *PERIOD/ever* and have a strengthening effect by implying 'biggest understatement' of the indicated period. The most common periods are *year* (47 instances), *century* (12) and *millennium* (5), followed by *day*, *night*, *week*, *month*, *decade*, *life(time)* and *ever* (with 1 or 2 instances each). Premodifiers mostly work in a similar direction. While the most common type is *a (little) bit of*, the total of three downtoning types come to only 42 percent and upgrading types (17) and tokens (39, 56 percent) dominate. These include instances such as *big*, *huge*, *massive*, *quite a*, *major*, *serious*, *hell of*, *egregious*, *grotesque*.

5.2. Self-directed MREs

As shown in example (1) the term 'self-directed' indicates that the reference is within the speaker's own utterances, to their own choice of words (*flighty* in (1)). It does not mean that the statement refers to them as a person: in (1) *flighty* characterizes Bonnie, not the speaker herself, Kate.

In both (1) and (8) the speakers produce a proposition and at the same time label it as an understatement, i.e. as something that at face value is not fully applicable and thus partly devalued. This only makes sense if some ulterior aim can be reached in this way. (8) is a story about a *phenomenal*, i.e. extraordinary, experience of the speaker, who deems this already strong word as insufficient. In other words, she uses the *understatement* MRE in order to upgrade the statement: the experience was indeed more than phenomenal, it was, by implication, something for which the speaker lacks an appropriate word.

(8) Carly: ... The first time I had sex with Jason, I didn't even know his name. He was this smoking-hot guy who lived above Jake's, and I walked in the bar, I hit on him, and next thing you know, we're upstairs having sex in his room. To say it was phenomenal is an **understatement** ... (GH, 2007)

Pattern E (Table 5) used in this and many examples in this section is the most typical pattern of self-directed MREs (36 of its 38 attestations occur in this use). Together with four instances of pattern D, both cover more than 50 percent of self-directed uses, which are thus shown to favour explicit highlighting of the targeted understatement. Pattern B (*there*) is not found in this use at all, and C is very rare (3 instances).

In (9) the expression employed by Joe, here *disappointed*, is also found inadequate, but the difference to (8) is that the substitution by a more appropriate expression is not left to implicature and the hearer, but the speaker himself upgrades to *appalling* and *professionally irresponsible*. Such upgrades or other types of explanations are very common. Having both the understated and the 'literal', more adequate forms co-present marks and highlights the difference between what might have been just about bearable, though bad (*disappointed*) and the totally unacceptable.

(9) Josh: Wow, looks like I'm late for the party.
Joe: We're just about to start.
Jeff: Have a seat, Josh.

Joe: All right. I was just telling Julia and Jamie the main reason for this meeting is to discuss the grave oversight in the ER last night. We also have to address your sexual misconduct on the job. When I tell you I'm disappointed, obviously, that's a **big understatement**. I find it appalling and professionally irresponsible. (AMC, 2006)

Unlike (8), this example is directly interactional, involving the assessment of one interlocutor's behaviour by another interlocutor. This makes it confrontational, which is not only produced by the upgrading force of the MRE as such, but also by the upscaling premodification *big* and the adverbial *obviously*. In sum, the MRE is used to perform a face-threatening act (FTA) rather forcefully.

An FTA also occurs in (10), where two policemen disagree about professional conduct, and where the MRE is clearly about the addressee. In this interaction the speaker (Ronnie), using the standard formula (cf. (8)), does not explicitly upgrade afterwards, but what he says preceding the MRE substantiates the assessment expressed. The strong premodification (*massive*) reinforces the statement.

- (10) Dominic: ... That's why I became a cop in the first place.
 Ronnie: You know, that's really all stand-up of you, Dom, but if I'm being honest, I don't buy it this time.
 Dominic: Don't buy what?
 Ronnie: Look. You know if it was up to me, you'd already be off this case. I think I've made that pretty clear.
 Dominic: Oh, yeah.
 Ronnie: You're way too involved in Sonny's life. And I'm not just talking about his business – his family. You're friends with his kids. Hell, last week, his wife tried to bang you. I mean, to say that the lines aren't blurring for you would be a **massive understatement**.
 Dominic: Well, you know what? It's a good thing I know what I'm doing, then.
 Ronnie: Oh, do you? (GH, 2009)

While the supposed understatements in (8) and (9) were not (typical) understatement forms, this is somewhat different here. *Blurring lines* is a typically vague, underspecific statement, which sounds more harmless than the situation may be, and negation is involved, which is also common in understatement, specifically the litotic kind (cf. Claridge 2024). The speaker might be implying by this fairly typical form that it would be improper to hide behind the non-literalness of rhetorical means. The manipulative potential of such devices may be the backdrop to such uses.

Example (11) contains an even more prototypical understatement formulation: expressions with *not exactly* have been highlighted in this function by Wierzbicka (2006: 33). Because this form is conventional, it makes the understatement already rather direct. Adding as an initial frame the fairly unusual realisation *using understatement*, an abbreviated form (Hübler 2011: 113), throws the emphatic potential of understatement into relief and thus underlines forcefully that they have not *at all* been close.

- (11) Kate: Oh, I don't think you could have said anything that would make me feel happier. Thank you. Did I say something wrong?
 Roman: No, no. It's not what you said, it's what you did. That's the second time you've hugged me in a week, Kate.
 Kate: Well, I'm flattered that you're counting. But does it upset you?
 Roman: No, no, no. It doesn't upset me. I was just wondering why, that's all. Using **understatement**, we haven't exactly been that close.
 Kate: I guess I'm just an affectionate person. I've always thought of you as a physical man. Is it really a problem that I'm showing my appreciation for your support?
 Roman: My support. You are as slick as they come, Kate Roberts. (DAYS, 2002)

Talking about a bad relationship between interlocutors clearly has FTA potential, as either one of them or both must have been responsible for this.

In (12) the interaction is also confrontational, but the MRE is not used about the interlocutor. Instead it is used to construct a strong argument countering the addressee's opinion, an argument that relates to the speaker's past experience. Again the MRE works as an upgrader, i.e. the marriage was more than *rocky*, which is supported by the postmodifying *of the century*.

- (12) Ross: You are crazy about Manning. All right? Just admit it.
 Ta: No, I'm not going to admit it because it's not true, ok? No way. Listen, I was married to him before, ok? And to say that our marriage was rocky would be the **understatement of the century**.
 Ross: Well, this is a new century.
 Ta: Drop it, Ross, ok? (OLTL, 2002)

As seen above (section 5.1), *of the century* is a common modifier with 12 instances and not to be taken at face value, as *century*, *year*, *month* etc. all simply indicate 'a long time' with upgrading force. Ross' attempt to activate its literal meaning as a counterargument is therefore rebutted by Ta. According to Hübler (2011: 111) metapragmatic comments may lead to

(extended) discussion, but this is rarely the case in this data. The presence of *would* does not function as mitigation, but rather adds further strength to the point made (similar in (10) above and (16) below).

The above instances are typical of self-directed uses, but the final one to be discussed here is somewhat different. The self-referential type used by Genevieve labels her first statement in (13) as an understatement, which indeed contains a typical form, namely *a little bit* ADJ. But she does so only on prompting by Ashley, who critically picks up exactly this phrasing. Then she corrects it to a hyperbolic metaphor, which admits that her understatement, which may have already been intended as an emphatic type, was nevertheless too weak. This may also indicate that the emphatic reading that (some) understatements intend is not understood by all hearers.

- (13) Genevieve: I know that Jack can be a little bit obsessive about business.
- Ashley: A little bit? Did you just say “A little bit ”?
- Genevieve: Oh. (Laughs)
- Ashley: (Laughs)
- Genevieve: **Understatement, huh?** More like he’s the Captain Ahab of the corporate world.
- Ashley: (Laughs) That’s kind of who Jack is. (Y&R 2012)

What all uses above have in common is that the speakers using the self-directed MRE upscale their message either implicitly, just by mentioning *understatement*, or explicitly, by accompanying reformulations. Thus, understatement and overstatement MREs are mirror images of each other: the former upgrade and the latter downtone (cf. Section 3). Also, the common pattern identified above is very similar to the one found for hyperbole, e.g. ‘it’s no exaggeration/hyperbole to say/call it X’ (Claridge 2011: 121–122). Pre- and post-modification is both present, the former only with strengthening forms (e.g. *big* (9), *massive* (10)) in order to support the upgrading function. Modal elements like *would* in (10, 12) are present to indicate the non-applicability of the understatement formulation. Where the utterance refers to the addressee (10), pragmatic markers may be present to provide some modulation. The supposed understatement commented on and strengthened mostly contains an unfavourable evaluation as in (9) (67.5 %) and only rarely a clearly favourable one, e.g. (8) (11.2 %), but in both cases refers less frequently to an addressee as in (10) (15.6 %) than to the speaker (12) (42.2 %), third person (13) or other (e.g. an event, (8)) (42.2 %) (similar Taylor 2016: 118). The full distribution is given in Fig. 1. Note that in self-directed MREs the second-person referent of the understatement (2P-ref) is automatically also the target of the MRE comment, while in other-directed cases the first-person referent of the understatement is the addressee of the MRE comment.

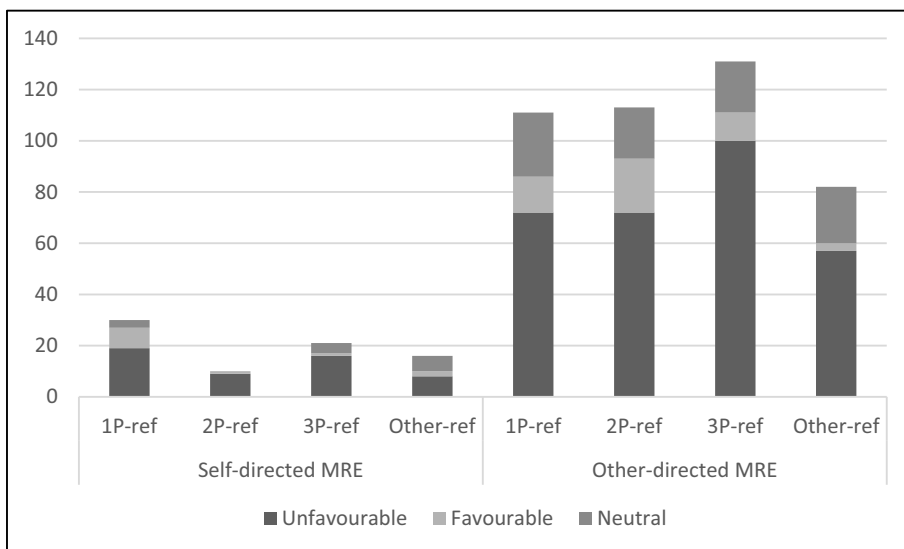


Fig. 1. Characteristics of the supposed understatement targeted by the MRE.

5.3. Other-directed MREs

The more frequent use in SOAP are other-directed MREs, i.e. those that are reactions to another speaker’s utterance containing a supposed understatement. The understated utterance is produced by an interlocutor in all cases, except for two cases, where a third (absent) speaker is indicated. The suspected understatement and the MRE may be predications about either interlocutor or about somebody/something else, as shown in Fig. 1.

The upgrading function seen in self-directed MREs above is generally also present in these cases. This is very well shown in (14), where *not go so well* from the question is upgraded to an implied ‘extremely badly’ by way of the MRE alone. This may show conventionalization of the formula, perhaps especially in this common syntactic form (cf. Table 5).

- (14) Margo: Hey. Did you find Carly?
 Jack: Yeah.
 Margo: Didn't go so well, huh?
 Jack: **That's an understatement.**
 Margo: Well, can I buy you a cup of coffee? (ATWT, 2010)

In spite of its bluntness, the form can still be used in the supportive manner present in (14).² In contrast, the moderately frequent pattern B with *there*, found in (15), is per se more confrontational. The phrasing seems like a mix of deictic and presentational *there*-construction, pointing accusingly to the immediately preceding discourse. Both introductory pragmatic markers add to the disalignment between the two speakers, *well* marking a dispreferred response and *now* having a challenging tone.

- (15) Eve: Neither am I, Aunt Irma. I'm a doctor.
 Aunt-Irma: Doctor of what? Sex? Because that's what your education is in.
 Eve: Would you please listen to me, Aunt Irma? You know that kind of person that I used to be? Well, I'm not that kind of person anymore. I'm – I've changed my life. I've worked so hard, Aunt Irma. And it's true. It is very true that when I was younger – oh, I made a mess of my life.
 Aunt-Irma: **Well, now, there's an understatement!**
 Eve: Yes, but – but it was a long, long time ago. (PASS, 2004)

While the *that*-pattern also occurs in self-directed MRE comments, *there*-comments are only found in other-directed instances, which highlights the interactional difference between the two.

Pattern D is illustrated in (16)–(17), where *annoyed* and *hit it off* realise the X-slot, a word or phrase repeated from the previous speaker's utterance³ and assumed to have too little force or be an understatement. In (16), Anna implies that much more anger was in fact shown by David, who – perhaps grudgingly – admits that this was so.

- (16) David: Oh, yeah, that's right, because I became annoyed that you answered my phone.
 Anna: **“Annoyed” would be an understatement.**
 David: Fine. I overreacted. (AMC, 2001)
- (17) Lily: I am so happy that you and Carly hit it off. I knew you would.
 Neal: **“Hit it off” is an understatement.**
 Lily: Ooh! Do you have plans to see her again? (ATWT, 2008)

While *would* in (6)–(7) above indicates counterfactuality and potentiality, the more likely use in (16) is Anna using it to make a point about David's typical behaviour (cf. OED s.v. *will*, II.iii.33) of saying too little. In (17), Neal re-uses Lily's phrasing in the MRE to create a clearly upgraded implicature, to which Lily replies with a presumably pleased *ooh*. This is one of the rarer examples, where the MRE is not used in a confrontational manner. (18) is again in the latter mode, which is made even more pronounced by the use of the MRE to actively interrupt the other speaker. As in the two previous examples, there is a repeated form (here *mistake*), but combined with pattern A (*that*). The repetition is said with a questioning intonation, clearly doubting the applicability of what Jackie has said. Such explicit target repetitions are not uncommon, coming to 68 instances and thus 15 percent of the other-directed data.

- (18) Jackie: I was just trying to protect you, your family.
 Nick: What family?!
- Jackie: I was wrong. I was really wrong and made a mistake that I'm going to regret for the rest –
 Nick: **Mistake? That's just a bit of an understatement, wouldn't you say?**
 Jackie: No. Do not start with the jokes. Do not start to build up your walls again. (B&B 2004)

The combination of *just, a bit of* and the tag add a touch of confrontational irony. The presence of modal elements (like *would* in (16)), modifiers (18) and pragmatic markers (19) usually upgrade rather than downtone the impact of the MRE. (19) shows disagreement about which aspects helped win a court case and Daniel mocks Nora's assessment by the MRE

² Intonation and multi-modality will of course play a role in the interpretation of such uses, but their inclusion in the analysis is beyond the scope of this study.

³ This pattern also occurs four times in self-directed usage, in these cases without repetition.

accompanied by *yeah* with a ‘yeah sure’-meaning and *a little bit* with an ironic import. Nora used hedgy understatement in her utterance, prompted by her desire not to give this aspect greater credit, which Daniel apparently does not agree with.

- (19) Nora: Okay, okay, okay. The defense’s witness might have had a slight credibility problem, that’s true.
 Daniel: **Yeah, that’s a little bit of an understatement.**
 Nora: But I still say it was my incredible closing argument that convicted her.
 Daniel: Yeah, or maybe just a little bit of both. (OLTL, 2004)

Similarly, *well* and *might* in (20) are not mitigating. *Well* plus vocative clearly names the person targeted by the MRE, while *might* is outweighed by *of the millennium*. The following information added by Eve explains that the matter is much larger and more serious than Lucy’s utterance made it out to be. Such explanations and elaborations are provided in quite many examples by MRE users.

- (20) Lucy: Look, Eve, I know you are really, really, really mad about me for changing those DNA results.
 Eve: **Well, Lucy, that just might be the understatement of the millennium.** You let my husband think I was dead, and then you jumped in to comfort him yourself. (PC, 2001)

The last few examples were expanded variations on the declarative *that*-pattern (A). As indicated in Section 5.1, there are also interrogatives and exclamatives. These only occur with other-directed MREs. Interrogatives as in (21) overtly question the correctness or appropriateness of the other speaker’s utterance and thus have confrontation potential. Here, Kate reacts to the criticism by Victor’s MRE and provides the literally correct version.

- (21) Victor: Oh, typical Stefano. Everything’s got to go through him. What else did he say?
 Kate: I really don’t want to talk about it, okay? Let’s just say it didn’t end well.
 Victor: **Is that an understatement?**
 Kate: Okay. I left him. There. Are you happy? You happy you know all the latest gossip? (DAYS, 2010)

Kate’s formulation *didn’t end well* is vague and leaves open the precise nature of the ending, in contrast to the clear *I left him*. The original phrasing omits the responsibility for the break-up and thus could also be called euphemistic. Euphemisms have various realisations, one of them being understatement (Allan and Burridge 1991: ch.1), so either term might have been used here metapragmatically.⁴ Interactionally, it would not make a difference, as both would transport similar criticism of Kate’s expression.

The MRE form found in (22) is identical to that in (21), but lacks the question mark. This and the context (*boy*, Brad’s response) has led to its classification as one of the two exclamatives found (see (3) for the other).⁵ Victoria clearly upgrades Brad’s assessment of *not always easy* to perhaps ‘permanently extremely difficult’. She is in a perfect position for this, Brad’s statement being about herself. Despite the correction, the exchange is not confrontational, as Brad’s utterance was sympathetic and a strong reply only has the effect of inducing more pity (cf. the affiliative function mentioned by Bublitz and Hübner 2007).

- (22) Brad: Hmm. Come here. I imagine it’s not always easy being Victor Newman’s daughter, is it?
 Victoria: **Boy, is that an understatement.**
 Brad: Well, try and relax, put it out of your mind. (Y&R 2005)

The final case concerns another use that occurs only with other-directed MREs. Jackie’s MRE in (23) reacts to Stephanie’s utterance, which has understatement potential (negation, *certain appeal*), but targets the whole person as such. The other speaker is characterized and evaluated as a frequent, perhaps notorious understater. The choice of the phrasing with *queen* may imply a positive, admiring assessment – or it might be ironic.

- (23) Stephanie: Gosh, I can’t deny that besting Forrester Creations has a certain ... appeal.
 Jackie: **Always the queen of understatement.**
 Taylor: Well, I’m sure there’s a lot more to it than that.
 Nick: Well, like what? Would you like to see Eric living in a cardboard box under the harbor freeway?
 Stephanie: No. Been there, done that. It’s not much fun. I am not driven by revenge. (B&B 2009)

⁴ *Euphemism* itself occurs in SOAP 89 times, all of which are metalinguistic/-pragmatic uses.

⁵ As a reviewer pointed out, a completely certain classification would need access to the intonation used, but cf. fn 2.

However, at face value most such cases seem to show positive evaluation, e.g. *king/(true) master/mistress/patroness of understatement, have a gift/talent/(real) skill for understatement* (e.g. (5) above). The only instance showing a critical attitude is (24), which might be due rather to the situation, i.e. the unwanted interruption, than to the person as such.

- (24) Brooke: Edmund, for God's sake, take some time and think about this.
 (Knock-on-door) Ethan: Is this a bad time?
 Edmund: **Boy, you're a walking understatement.** Look, Brooke, that story that I was telling you about – it's on the table in the library. Take a look at it.

Summing up, other-directed uses confirm the upgrading function already found with self-directed MREs above. They add in most cases confrontation and disalignment with the addressee – not only with what they do, which was also present in examples like (10, 11), but more crucially with how they speak, i.e. how they themselves present their actions. Most cases thus represent FTAs, e.g. (15–16) and (18–21) above. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is a pronounced tendency for the supposed understatement targeted by the MRE to contain an unfavourable evaluation (68.9 %), while only 11.2 percent are clearly favourable. Almost a quarter (23.9 %) of unfavourable understatements are 1st person utterances and thus the MRE comment directly targets the addressee, e.g. (15, 16, 18) (cf. Fig. 1). Given that understatement MREs upgrade and thus move in the general direction of overstatement it may be of interest that hyperboles also typically concern negative aspects, to 65 percent in BNC data (Claridge 2011: 81).

6. Conclusion

What has the SOAP data shown about understatement MREs? First, there are a minority of self-directed uses, and thus little unprompted rhetorical exploitation of this MRE to produce interesting effects in one's own speech. Secondly, MRE comments are to an overwhelming extent realised by only five patterns, which may show conventionalized usage. Thirdly, semantically speaking understatement MREs are a mirror image of hyperbole MREs, i.e. their downtoning function (Section 3), by involving an upgrading of the meaning based on the assessment that the original understatement is not accepted as appropriate. Interestingly, the positive assessment of understating (as opposed to overstating) noted by Fox and Wierzbicka (Section 2) seems not to be shared here. As the targeted understatement itself often contains unfavourable content or evaluations and targets the addressee of the MRE comment in a non-negligible proportion of cases, a critical and challenging interactional effect is a common outcome, as in metapragmatic acts generally (Hübler 2011). While this is clearest in the other-directed cases it is also found in many self-directed ones. This functional aspect is closest to Claridge's criticism/challenge and to Schneider's problematizing function, which thus can be said to be shared between MIEs and MREs.

As a final point let us return to the fictional nature of the data and the representativeness of the results thus attained. Aspects that might be induced by the dramatic needs of the soap genre could be the prominence of confrontational other-directed examples as well as the dominance of negative content highlighted by the MREs. These are things that move the storyline forward in interesting ways. They may not be equally frequent in authentic conversation and potentially other aspects might be found there. This will need to be left to further research. Regarding the formal characteristics found here a brief view into the COCA can help, however. The most frequent pattern in SOAP (pattern A) may have been overused, as it is only found in COCA in 11 percent of the data. In contrast, many items co-occurring in the MRE comments in SOAP are corroborated by the collocates and clusters provided in COCA's information page for the word *understatement*. Top items there and in SOAP are premodifying *gross, huge, massive, major, considerable, typical, vast, characteristic, slight, a bit of*, and post-modifying *of the day/year/century/millennium/decade*. The modal elements *would* and *probably* are the top-most verbal and adverbial collocates. The script writers thus seem to have captured some features of authentic language use in their dialogues.

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