

When scalarity meets cross-domain mapping: A corpus-based lexical-conceptual analysis of metaphorical hyperbole



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Abstract

Metaphor and hyperbole are traditionally treated as distinct tropes, yet they frequently co-occur in discourse, raising theoretical questions about the nature of metaphorical hyperbole. Despite increasing scholarly interest, the structural relationship between metaphor and hyperbole, particularly how they interact within a single lexical unit, remains an open question. Addressing this gap, the present study develops a lexical-conceptual account of metaphorical hyperbole and examines its linguistic realization in a corpus of promotional hospitality discourse. Through systematic lexical analysis, we identify the frequency, source domains, and linguistic realizations of metaphorical hyperbole in authentic texts. We demonstrate that metaphorical hyperbole arises when the metaphorical mapping provides the basis for scalar modification. We further distinguish two subtypes of metaphorical hyperbole based on whether encyclopedic knowledge is required to interpret the mapping. By elucidating the structural properties and usage patterns of metaphorical hyperbole, the study broadens the typological scope of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and underscores the importance of examining composite tropes that operate simultaneously rather than in isolation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor and hyperbole are among the most pervasive figures of speech in human communication. Metaphor is a systematic set of cross-domain mappings through which information from a “source domain” is mapped onto a “target domain” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003). Hyperbole is an expression that is more extreme than justified given its ontological referent (Burgers et al., 2016, p. 166). This definition implies three key features of hyperbole, *qua* exaggeration, gradability, and an ontological referent. Consider the following example:

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(1) This mathematics textbook is a *Bible*: A Definitive Guide to the Last 4000 Years of Theories

From a metaphor perspective, the lexical item “Bible” involves a cross-domain mapping in which a religious text (source domain) is mapped onto a non-religious object (a mathematics textbook; target domain). The literal religious sense is not intended. Instead, “Bible” is metaphorically reinterpreted to mean “authoritative reference work.” From a hyperbole perspective, the same expression conveys an extreme evaluation: describing a textbook as “a definitive guide” to “the last 4000 years of theories” exaggerates its scope and authority beyond what is contextually plausible. This scalar intensification operates independently of the metaphorical mapping.

This example illustrates that metaphor and hyperbole contribute different types of meaning adjustment. Metaphor involves cross-domain mapping, while hyperbole involves scalar intensification, even when they occur within the same lexical unit. Early pragmatic accounts treat metaphor and hyperbole as points along a single continuum, arguing that they are “not genuinely distinct categories” (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995, p. 95). However, recent scholarship has challenged this continuum hypothesis. Carston and Wearing (2015) argue that examples like (1) should not be positioned along a single scale but instead be understood as instances in which metaphor and hyperbole coexist, each making an independent contribution to meaning. Empirical findings support this distinction. A corpus study by Burgers et al. (2018) shows that metaphors and hyperboles are associated with different grammatical environments: metaphors frequently occur in prepositional constructions, whereas hyperboles are tied to (indefinite) pronouns such as “everybody” and “nobody.” Psycholinguistic studies indicate further differences. Deamer (2013), for instance, found that metaphor and hyperbole display distinct reading-time patterns, suggesting that they may involve different processing mechanisms. Overall, this body of research demonstrates that metaphor and hyperbole are distinct tropes with different linguistic and cognitive properties.

Despite these advances, most studies have examined metaphor and hyperbole separately, while expressions that combine them, known as metaphorical hyperbole,¹ remain underexplored. Existing work on metaphorical hyperbole is largely theoretical (e.g., Brdar-Szabó and Brdar, 2010; Vereza, 2016), and little is known about its frequency, distribution, or linguistic structure in authentic discourse. This is a significant gap given the prevalence of such expressions in everyday communication (Cano Mora, 2013) and their role in shaping evaluative meaning.

The present study addresses this gap by conducting a corpus-based investigation of metaphorical hyperbole in real-world discourse. First, drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), it provides a holistic profile of metaphorical hyperbole by examining its frequency, source domains, and linguistic realizations in promotional hospitality discourse, a context rich in figurative expression. Second, it contributes to theoretical accounts by showing how these source domains structure gradable evaluations, so as to offer a principled lexical-conceptual analysis of metaphorical hyperbole.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews prior theoretical accounts of metaphorical hyperbole, focusing on Brdar-Szabó and Brdar’s (2010) application of Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) and Vereza’s (2016) Prototype Theory (PT). Section 3 describes the corpus and methodological procedures for identifying metaphorical hyperboles. Section 4 examines their frequency and distribution in real-world discourse. Section 5 presents a lexical-conceptual analysis showing how specific source domains shape evaluative meaning when integrated with CMT. Section 6 concludes by summarizing the study’s contributions and outlining directions for future research.

2. COGNITIVE ACCOUNT OF METAPHORICAL HYPERBOLES: RELEVANT PRECEDING STUDIES

Metaphorical hyperbole simultaneously embodies the defining features of both metaphor and hyperbole—namely, cross-domain mapping and meaning intensification. To account for its underlying conceptual structure, it is therefore essential to examine how these two types of shifts are organized and how they interact.

In this section, we first review two theoretical approaches that have been applied to account for metaphorical hyperboles. Brdar-Szabó and Brdar (2010) use Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) to show how multiple cognitive inputs can interact to produce novel, context-sensitive meanings. Prototype Theory (PT), originally developed by Rosch (1978, 1983) and applied to hyperbole by Vereza (2016), provides insights into how particular lexical items may be selected as prototypical representations of a category or scale. While both CBT and PT offer valuable perspectives on metaphorical hyperbole, neither fully captures the structural relationship between cross-domain mapping and scalar modification. Building on these insights, the present study primarily relies on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), enriched with

¹ We use the term “metaphorical hyperbole” to refer to expressions in which metaphor and hyperbole co-occur. This choice does not imply a hierarchy between the two tropes. It emphasizes their joint contribution to the intensified meaning. The alternative “hyperbolic metaphor” was considered, but not chosen, so as to not activate a potentially confusing mathematical interpretation.

scalar principles. We propose that metaphorical hyperbole arises when a metaphor's cross-domain mapping provides the conceptual structure for scalar up- or downgrading.

2.1. Metaphor and cross-domain mappings

Figurative language has traditionally been viewed as a deliberate departure from ordinary speech, used to create stylistic or rhetorical emphasis in texts (Genung, 1893). Among the various types of figurative language, metaphor has received particular attention due to its prevalence across contexts (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2004; Deignan et al., 2013). Modern perspectives, however, move beyond viewing metaphor merely as ornamentation. Instead, they treat metaphor as a fundamental cognitive mechanism that structures human thought by allowing one concept to be understood in terms of another.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), a widely adopted framework in metaphor research, proposes that metaphors consist of systematic cross-domain mappings in which knowledge from a source domain is projected onto a target domain (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003; Semino, 2008). For example:

- (2) Thesis writing is full of **twists and turns**.
 (3) She is at a **crossroads** in her academic **journey**.

Both sentences reflect the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, in which the source domain JOURNEY provides a set of correspondences for understanding the target domain LIFE. In sentence (2), "twists and turns" corresponds to unexpected challenges in thesis writing. In sentence (3), "crossroads" corresponds to a point of uncertainty in one's career. Metaphor is thus seen as constitutive of human thought, revealing how people structure experiences conceptually rather than merely embellishing language (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003).

2.2. Hyperboles and the concept of SCALE

Hyperboles are typically grounded in the notion of scale, whereby meaning is intensified through exaggerated reference to magnitude (Claridge, 2011; Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza, 2017; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2014). Expressions with hyperboles do not conform to a single logical formula or uniform grammatical pattern. They occur across a variety of grammatical categories, including adjectives and adverbs (e.g., exclusive, perfectly), superlatives (e.g., the best), all-quantifiers (e.g., all, every), nouns (e.g., pinnacle), and verbs (e.g., revived) (Edwards, 2000). Empirical analyses have shown that adjectives (29%), adverbs (14%), and nouns (14%) are the most frequent word classes in hyperbole (Spitzbardt, 1963; Cano Mora, 2011).

Extant research has examined the relationship between intensification and linguistic scale by drawing on a variety of theoretical frameworks. Because linguistic scales are bidirectional, semantic intensification in hyperbole may develop in two directions: strengthening (auxesis), which raises a gradable concept along the scale, and mitigation (meiosis), which lowers it. On this basis, Brdar-Szabó and Brdar (2010) contend that hyperboles can be situated in the four quadrants of Israel's Scalar Model of Polarity (Israel, 1996, 1998, 2001), depending on whether exaggeration amplifies or attenuates the intended meaning (see Fig. 1).

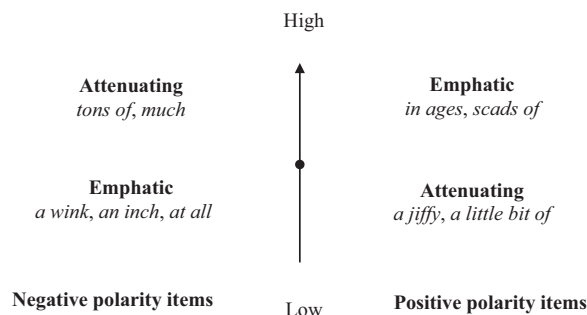


Fig. 1. The scalar model of polarity (Israel, 1996).

Polarity items, in this model, are scalar operators whose lexical meanings are constructed relative to a set of alternatives and interpreted against the background of a larger scalar structure (Israel, 1996). Depending on the semantic valence of an utterance (positive or negative) and whether the item contributes to emphasis or attenuation, polarity-sensitive items can be positioned within Israel's four quadrants. Many expressions align well with this model, since they exhibit clear scalar orientation by either intensifying (auxesis) or downplaying (meiosis) the state of affairs they describe.

For instance, in positive–auxesis, an expression such as “The hotel was absolutely perfect” amplifies a positive statement through an intensifier like “absolutely.” In positive–meiosis, as in “The service was rather nice,” the same positive polarity is maintained but the force is attenuated through understatement. In negative–auxesis, expressions such as “There wasn't a wink of sleep all night” heighten negation by stressing the total absence of the described state. Finally, in negative–meiosis, as in “There weren't tons of people at the event,” negation is softened to convey a mitigated or mildly positive evaluation.

Yet, not all hyperboles fit neatly in this framework. A significant subset of expressions lacks overt scalar properties in their linguistic form, yet still serves to amplify or mitigate meaning (e.g., the term “Bible” in Example (1)). In such cases, interpretation relies heavily on contextual knowledge, making it difficult to assign precise scalar positioning. Israel (2001) himself acknowledges this limitation, indicating that many nouns and adjectives are poor candidates for scalar classification because “their meanings do not saliently contrast with an ordered set of alternatives” (p. 310).

For instance, the Chinese neologism 天花板 (tiānhuābǎn, literally “ceiling”) serves as a hyperbole, as in 該產品是行業的天花板 (“The product is the ceiling of the industry”), and denotes the highest possible standard in a domain. The term is essentially non-gradable and non-scalar: regardless of the product's size or price, its excellence cannot be expressed in varying degrees of “ceiling.” Similarly, the adjective “magical,” as in “It is a magical place to get married,” also functions as a hyperbole and resists scalar interpretation. One cannot easily quantify or compare the “degree of magic” across contexts such as levitating an object or erasing someone's memory, which makes it incompatible with traditional scalar modelling.² Overall, these examples demonstrate that while scalar models capture certain quantitative aspects of hyperbole, they do not fully account for cases in which qualitative, metaphorical meaning is present.

2.3. Metaphorical hyperboles and Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT)

The limitations of scalar approaches highlight the need for a framework that accounts for both quantitative and qualitative meaning shifts in metaphorical hyperbole. Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) offers one such approach. Brdar-Szabó and Brdar (2010) argue that the gradability in metaphorical hyperbole arises from the interaction of multiple mental spaces, rather than a single stable mapping. While both CMT (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2013) and CBT (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002) seek to explain how concepts are constructed at the cognitive level, the latter introduces the notion of “mental space,” rather than “conceptual domain.” This distinction highlights the dynamic and context-sensitive character of cognitive representations. CBT is thus particularly well-suited to capturing the mechanisms underlying highly creative, unconventional, and non-literal expressions, where meaning construction emerges not from a single stable mapping but from the interaction of multiple inputs.³ The sentence, “The product is the *ceiling* of the industry,” illustrates how quantitative and qualitative shifts in meaning can be produced through such blending.

“Ceiling” is an example of metaphorical hyperbole in Chinese. At first glance, the term may appear non-gradable, simply a label for a physical structure. Yet in context, it becomes clear that the expression conveys the highest standard in a field. This meaning arises from the interaction of two conceptual inputs. One input concerns evaluative notions such as quality and excellence, while the other draws on spatial and structural knowledge, where a ceiling marks the upper limit of a building. It is a hyperbole because the concept of the ceiling, normally a fixed point in space, is applied to a product to signal extreme value. In this way, what starts as a non-gradable lexical item acquires gradable properties

² Adjectives can be categorised into two subcategories based on two criteria: (1) whether the adjective can have both a “comparative” and a “superlative” form, and (2) whether the adjective can be intensified by an adverb (e.g., very). For instance, “good” falls under the gradable adjective category as it can take a comparative form (better) and a superlative form (best), and it can also be modified by an adverb (e.g., very good) (Jackson, 2002). The adjective “magical” itself is considered non-gradable because it does not inherently possess the property of degree, unless it is modified by an adverb (e.g., very magical).

³ Fauconnier and Turner (2002) provide a framework for understanding meaning construction through conceptual blending. Later research has highlighted that the original model gives limited explicit attention to interlocutor interaction and contextual grounding, which are important to interpreting blends in communicative settings (Brandt and Brandt, 2005; Mierzwińska-Hajnos, 2016). Brandt and Brandt (2005), building on Fauconnier and Turner, proposed a six-space model that introduces the Semiotic Space and Relevance Space, and thus incorporates context and speaker–hearer interaction. Although the present study does not apply conceptual blending to the analysis of metaphorical hyperboles, these developments provide readers with additional context on approaches for analyzing meaning in interaction.

through the interaction of these inputs, creating a conceptual scale and allowing the audience to perceive a clear exaggeration. Fig. 2 shows the conceptual blending process of the expression “ceiling.”

CBT has been influential in explaining how meaning can be achieved through the interaction of multiple cognitive inputs. At the same time, some scholars have offered constructive observations regarding its cognitive economy and the verifiability of spatial representations. In certain cases, alternative approaches (e.g., CMT) may offer a more streamlined interpretation. For example, the expression “ceiling” can be interpreted through a “correlation and contrast” perspective across the two input spaces, highlighting the analogy between the physical structure of a building and the abstract notion of quality (Ruiz de Mendoza and Peña, 2005). Furthermore, when applying CBT to metaphorical hyperbole, Brdar-Szabó and Brdar (2010) acknowledge that the precise location of the scalar structure remains open to interpretation, whether it resides in one of the input spaces or emerges in the blended space. Recognizing these constraints allows us to situate our theoretical proposal. Metaphorical hyperbole can be analyzed most effectively by combining CMT’s cross-domain mappings with scalar principles, where metaphor’s cross-domain mappings afford the conceptual conditions under which scalarization can emerge.



Fig. 2. Blend “quality” and “building”.

2.4. Metaphorical hyperboles and Prototype Theory (PT)

In cognitive linguistics, hyperbole has also been analyzed through the lens of Prototype Theory (PT), which emphasizes the selection of prototypical category members to convey exaggerated or intensified meaning. The concept of a prototype, or “best example,” is grounded in notions of family resemblance and frequency, referring to category members that most strongly exhibit the defining characteristics of that category (Rosch, 1978, 1983). The member that best exemplifies these characteristics is identified as the prototype.

Vereza (2016) extends this framework to hyperbole, proposing that exaggerated expressions are processed cognitively by selecting prototypical items in a category that exemplify the attribute the utterance seeks to emphasize. An illustrative example of metaphorical hyperbole is the noun “river” in the idiomatic expression “cry me a river,” which conveys excessive sorrow. The expression is a hyperbole that invokes a gradient of emotional intensity, with its propositional meaning positioned at the end of the scale, indicating profound sadness. At the same time, the metaphorical dimension of “river” emerges through the contrast between the literal referents of “tears” and “flowing liquid.” Unlike the conventional understanding of “category” in PT, which typically refers to collections of concrete entities, such as “apple” representing the category of fruit or “cola” representing the category of drinks (Rosch, 1978), Vereza (2016) extends the notion of categories to include gradable scales. This extension is evident in the potential to scale expressions from “cry a river” to “cry a sea” or “cry an ocean.” In this context, “river” is chosen over other members of the water category, such as “ocean,” “lake,” or “stream,” as the prototypical representation of tears due to its similarity in both forms, being slender and flowing, and magnitude, which signals abundance.

2.5. Metaphorical hyperbole: the current proposal

Our review of the literature reveals that metaphorical hyperbole has been accounted for through different lenses, even within cognitive linguistics. CBT emphasizes systematic mappings across domains and explains how concepts that are not inherently gradable can gain gradable properties through interactions among multiple mental spaces. PT, by contrast, adopts a lexical perspective, focusing on how specific words are selected to convey the intended intensity or meaning. Building on these insights, the present study proposes an integrated account: CMT provides the cross-domain mappings that establish the conceptual foundation, while scalar principles govern the intensification of meaning along these mappings, producing either intensified or attenuated meaning. In metaphorical hyperbole, cross-domain mapping thus serves as the necessary foundation for scalar exaggeration. For example, in “The product is the ceiling of the industry,” the physical concept of a “ceiling” is mapped onto the abstract domain of product quality. This mapping creates a framework in which a scalar interpretation becomes possible: the product is not merely good but positioned at the extreme upper bound of quality.

To evaluate the validity of this account, it is essential to examine how metaphorical hyperbole is realized in authentic discourse, which motivates the following research question: What are the manifestations of metaphorical hyperbole? By manifestation, we refer to the basic lexical items that appear in such expressions.

Semantic analysis of lexical items and their associated concepts is a common method for investigating the linguistic manifestation of conceptual metaphors, not merely as a tool for cataloging words but as a means of uncovering the systematic ways in which meaning is organized and extended across domains (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003; Zhao et al., 2022). From this perspective, Ahrens (2010) proposed a model aligned with the CMT paradigm and introduced the Mapping Principle: the principle that the choice of a source domain is not arbitrary but can be inferred from recurrent lexical items carried over into the target domain, as revealed by corpus-based analysis. In the conceptual metaphor AN IDEA IS A BUILDING, Gong et al. (2007), working with Chinese corpora, demonstrate that “foundation” appears more persistently than terms such as “damage,” “aged,” or “material.” This pattern is not merely a matter of frequency but reveals a structured conceptual mapping in which the notion of IDEA becomes anchored to the notion of a base. The researchers are therefore able to articulate this principle with empirical evidence – an idea is understood as a building because both require a foundation.

The lexical-conceptual approach adopted in the present study also opens up possibilities for investigating relationships across different domains. By bringing together lexical items within a broader domain, we can begin to see how systematic mappings underlie metaphorical hyperbole and how patterns of linguistic scalarity emerge. This approach not only identifies the words used and their frequency of occurrence but also enables us to explore the rationale behind these selections and how quantitative shifts, such as intensification, interact with qualitative shifts, such as cross-domain mapping. In this sense, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of metaphorical hyperbole, one that takes both the lexical evidence and the cognitive mechanisms that give rise to meaning, situating them within the broader dynamics of language use.

3. DATA

3.1. Materials

This study draws on a corpus compiled from the official websites of luxury hotels in Hong Kong and Singapore. The procedures for data collection follow those described in [Chen and Ahrens \(2025\)](#) and [Chen et al. \(2024\)](#). Using the *Five Star Alliance* platform (e.g., Suen, 2018), 31 hotels were identified in each location, covering both major international chains and independent boutique properties. The corpus contains 185,231 words (104,531 from Singapore and 80,700 from Hong Kong) and includes all written promotional content available on the websites, such as brand narratives, room and dining descriptions, and lifestyle-oriented marketing texts. The list of luxury hotels included in our analysis, with URLs and locations, is provided in the digital Appendix (https://osf.io/bfs47/overview?view_only=163e14de88a94bf9a969343bc4c390bc).

These materials represent a specific genre of luxury hospitality discourse, crafted to persuade and construct aspirational value rather than merely convey factual information. Given the association of luxury branding with hedonic experience, figurative language is often strategically employed to enhance perceived exclusivity and emotional appeal. Previous studies have demonstrated the prevalence of such language in hotel marketing. For example, Suen (2018) showed that Chinese luxury hotel websites frequently rely on metaphor and hyperbole to create an idealized, immersive image of the hotel, while Edo Marzá (2011) argues that this form of positive intensification has become so conventional in promotional discourse that it is generally not interpreted as deceptive.

Although the corpus is limited to one communicative setting, its rhetorically charged nature makes it a productive site for examining metaphorical hyperbole. The corpus allows us to investigate how lexical choices, scalar intensification, and cross-domain mappings operate in real promotional texts, patterns that are not easily observable without a genre-specific approach ([Ahrens, 2023](#)).

3.2. Metaphor identification

Expressions that contain both metaphor and hyperbole are classified as metaphorical hyperbole. In our coding procedure, we first assessed the metaphoricity of each lexical unit and then evaluated the degree of its meaning exaggeration. Metaphor identification was conducted using the MIPVU framework ([Steen et al., 2010](#)), which evaluates metaphoricity by comparing the basic meaning of a lexical unit with its contextual meaning. Sentence (4) is provided as an illustrative example ([Burgers et al., 2016](#); [Creed and Nacey, 2021](#), pp. 286–290).

(4) This place is *heaven* for guests, combining relaxing vibes with a memorable experience.

To identify “heaven” as a metaphor, we first examine its contextual meaning in the text, where it describes a hotel as a pleasurable place for guests. We then compare this meaning with its conventional dictionary definition, which refers to a religiously sanctified realm. The contrast between these two meanings allows us to ascertain whether a cross-domain mapping occurs, with the domain of “divine paradise” projected onto the domain of “a hotel.” When such a mapping is present, the lexical unit is marked as metaphorical ([Table 1](#)).

3.3. Source domain verification

After identifying metaphors in the corpus, the next step was to ascertain and verify their source domains, guided by the source domain verification procedure ([Ahrens and Jiang, 2020](#)). This procedure draws on authoritative lexical and ontological resources such as WordNet and SUMO, which situate each lexical unit within a network of verifiable semantic relations. Consider the expression “heaven” in Example (4). SUMO categorizes it under “architectural works,” from which the domain of RELIGION can be inferred. What becomes clear here is not only the classification of a single lexical item but also the rationale for cross-domain mapping, that is, how a religious concept is mobilized to express qualities of an entity. Understanding this mapping principle enables us to capture broader phenomena of meaning scalarity, showing how metaphors extend and intensify evaluative meaning across domains.

3.4. Hyperbole identification

Hyperboles were identified using the Hyperbole Identification Procedure (HIP; [Burgers et al., 2016](#)), which evaluates whether a lexical unit’s propositional meaning exceeds its intended meaning in extremity. The procedure is summarized and illustrated in [Table 2](#), with sentence (4) as an illustrative example.

Table 1
Metaphor identification procedure.

Step	Procedure	Example: "heaven"
a	Read the text as a whole	The researcher commences by reading the text to get a thorough understanding.
b	Determine the lexical units	The basic unit of analysis in MIPVU is the individual lexical unit, such as the word "heaven" in sentence (4).
c	Determine their contextual meaning	The word "heaven" in sentence (4) refers to a place where people can enjoy themselves. The word has no religious connotation.
d	Determine if there is a more basic meaning for each lexical unit	Referring to the <i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English</i> , the basic meaning of "heaven" pertains to the place where God is believed to live and where good people go after death.
e	Decide if the basic and contextual meaning of each lexical unit can be contrasted but understood by comparison	The contextual meaning of "heaven" in sentence (4) refers to a pleasurable, relaxing place (the hotel), whereas its basic meaning relates to religion and typically denotes sanctity. Although there exist discrepancies between these meanings, they can be understood through comparison.
f	Label the lexical unit as metaphorical if yes	Given the contrast and similarity between the contextual and basic meanings of "heaven," the expression is labelled as a Metaphor .

Table 2
Hyperbole identification procedure^a.

Step	Procedure	Example: "heaven"
a	Read the text as a whole	The researcher commences by reading the text to get a thorough understanding.
b	Determine the lexical units	The basic unit of analysis in MIPVU is the individual lexical unit, such as the word "heaven" in sentence (4).
c	Determine their intended meaning	The word "heaven" in sentence (4) refers to a place where people can enjoy themselves. The word has no religious connotation.
d	Determine their propositional meaning	Referring to the <i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English</i> , the basic meaning of "heaven" pertains to the place where God is believed to live and where good people go after death. Literally, it also refers to an extremely enjoyable situation or place.
e	Consider whether the lexical unit warrants constructing a scale	"Heaven" does not itself allow the construction of a scale. However, its intended meaning, that the hotel is a pleasurable, relaxing place, allows the construction of a scale assessing the hotel's quality (from positive to negative).
f	Determine the ontological referent of the lexical unit	The ontological referent of "heaven" is the hotel.
G	Label the lexical unit as hyperbole if it amplifies meaning beyond what is contextually plausible	The intended meaning of "heaven" refers to "a place where people can enjoy themselves." Its propositional meaning, however, encodes an "extremely enjoyable situation or place" (<i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English</i>), which exceeds what the context requires. Because it scales the evaluation upward, it is labelled as a Hyperbole .

^a The Hyperbole Identification Procedure (HIP) proposed by Burgers et al. (2016) is a versatile tool capable of identifying multiple figurative devices, including irony, metaphor, and hyperbole. While identifying a lexical unit as metaphorical does not automatically determine its hyperbole status, understanding its metaphorical meaning provides the propositional baseline necessary for assessing hyperbole intensity. For example, Step c in Table 2 involves interpreting the intended meaning of the lexical unit "heaven" (i.e., a place where people can enjoy themselves), which requires decoding its metaphoricality. Although "heaven" itself does not inherently carry a scalar value, its contextual meaning that describes the hotel as an exceptionally pleasurable place enables the construction of a scale ranging from negative to positive evaluations of quality. We do not imply that metaphorical comprehension necessarily precedes hyperbole comprehension in neurological processing, which would require experimental investigation. In this study, we are describing the interpretive sequence followed in the analytical procedure for corpus-based coding.

Hyperbole identification focuses on the degree of meaning intensification in context. While "heaven" in sentence (4) is metaphorical because it maps a religious concept onto a hotel, it is hyperbole when the expression conveys an exaggerated quality. In this example, hyperbole arises not from the metaphorical mapping but from the extent to which the expression amplifies meaning beyond what is contextually plausible.

Interrater reliability was assessed on ten percent of the corpus for both metaphor and hyperbole identification. Cohen's kappa for metaphor identification was 0.910, indicating strong agreement (McHugh, 2012), and for hyperbole identification it was 0.921, also reflecting strong agreement. Any discrepancies in the initial coding were discussed iteratively by the authors and resolved by consensus (Cameron and Maslen, 2010).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Frequency of metaphorical hyperbole

In our corpus, metaphors accounted for 3.77 percent of the total lexical units (6990 out of 185,231), while hyperboles accounted for 3.22 percent (5960 out of 185,231). Within these categories, 894 lexical units exhibited both metaphor and hyperbole. From a metaphor perspective, this indicates that 13 percent of metaphors are hyperboles (894 out of 6990). From the hyperbole perspective, 15 percent of hyperboles are also metaphorical (894 out of 5960). Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage of metaphors, hyperboles, and metaphorical hyperboles in our corpus.

Compared with Burgers et al.'s (2018) analysis of Dutch news discourse, in which 0.6 percent of metaphors (64 out of 10,819) were hyperboles and 12.0 per cent of hyperboles (64 out of 535) were metaphorical, our findings suggest the potential influence of genre: while metaphors may carry hyperbole features in news discourse, hyperboles are more common in hospitality discourse, reflecting the promotional orientation of the latter, as opposed to the more informational and restrained style of the former.

4.2. Source domains of metaphorical hyperbole

Table 4 presents the frequency of source domains for the 894 instances of metaphorical hyperbole identified in the corpus. OBJECT (211 instances) and ARTIFACTS (188 instances) together account for nearly half of all metaphorical hyperboles. Other common source domains include CONTAINER (111) and SPACE (92). Less frequent but still important are SUPERNATURE (82), MONARCH (54), and RELIGION (45), indicating that metaphorical hyperboles sometimes draw on culturally and socially salient domains to enhance impact.

Table 3
Frequency of metaphor, hyperbole, and metaphorical hyperbole in the corpus.

	Frequency	Percentage
Metaphor	6990	3.77%
Hyperbole	5960	3.22%
Metaphorical hyperbole	894	0.48%
Corpus size	185,231	–

Table 4
Frequency of source domains in metaphorical hyperbole.

	Source domain	Frequency
1	OBJECT	211
2	ARTIFACTS	188
3	CONTAINER	111
4	SPACE	92
5	SUPERNATURE	82
6	MONARCH	54
7	RELIGION	45
8	NATURAL PHENOMENA	31
9	LIVING ORGANISM	24
10	MACHINE	17
11	WAR	11
12	TEMPERATURE	10
13	ASTRONOMICAL BODY	8
14	MOUNTAIN	7
15	COLOUR	3
	Total	894

Upon closer investigation of the source domains, we observe that many metaphorical hyperboles rely on complex conceptual structures that span multiple domains and require integrating general knowledge, such as prototypes (Rosch, 1978) or culturally shared models (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). Take the expression “ceiling,” which we discussed earlier. The figurative meaning emerges through a blend of a primary metaphor and culturally specific frames. The primary metaphor GOOD IS UP provides a conceptual scaffold, linking upward orientation to positive evaluation. At the same time, knowledge about buildings, such as the fact that a ceiling is the highest point, fills in the details of the blend. Another group of source domains appears to be grounded more directly in everyday experiences. These metaphors rely on sensorimotor or perceptual patterns, such as noticing that adding more water to a glass raises its level (Pérez-Hernández, 2019). In these cases, the exaggeration builds on straightforward, recurrent experiences rather than on culturally informed or encyclopedic knowledge.

Recognizing these differences enables us to distinguish between two types of metaphorical hyperbole. Complex metaphorical hyperboles combine culturally shaped knowledge with primary metaphors, yielding multi-layered, nuanced meanings. Primary metaphorical hyperboles rely on direct experiential grounding and recurrent cognitive patterns to intensify meaning. The following section uses linguistic data from the corpus to illustrate the cognitive structures underlying these two types of metaphorical hyperbole and to demonstrate how the notion of scale arises from mappings across domains. The identification of source domains for primary metaphors draws on Grady (1997), which provides a list of primary metaphors—recurring, basic conceptual structures that originate in perceptual and embodied experience (Johnson, 1987).

5. THE ANALYSIS OF METAPHORICAL HYPERBOLE IN PROMOTIONAL HOSPITALITY DISCOURSE

5.1. Primary metaphorical hyperbole

Grady (1997) introduced the concept of primary metaphor, a type of conceptual projection grounded in the recurring correlation between two domains that regularly co-occur in concrete bodily experiences.^{4,5} These correlations emerge when two dimensions of experience, most importantly perceptual and motor experiences, often collectively referred to as sensorimotor experience (Yu and Jia, 2016; Yu et al., 2017), co-occur frequently enough that they become fused in the mind as stable patterns of thought. For instance, physical closeness often produces a sense of warmth, while physical distance results in an absence of warmth. These recurring bodily experiences provide the basis for associating warmth with comfort, emotional closeness, and affection, giving rise to the primary metaphor AFFECTION IS WARMTH. Conversely, the experience of coldness or physical separation motivates the metaphor LACK OF AFFECTION IS COLDNESS. Such mappings are not consciously taught but are acquired automatically through bodily interaction with the world (Clausner and Croft, 1999). Because the sensorimotor experiences from which they arise are universal, primary metaphors of this kind are also widely shared across cultures.

Building on this view, the first type of metaphorical hyperbole identified in this study is what we call *primary metaphorical hyperbole*. In these cases, the construction of a graded scale is grounded in “basic domains,” conceptual domains that are cognitively irreducible and cannot be decomposed into smaller components (Barcelona, 2003; Taylor, 1995). Examples of such domains include the visual field, pitch, and temperature (Langacker, 1987).

(5) Maintaining the *highest* hygiene standards to safeguard the health and well-being. . .

⁴ Contemporary physics conceptualizes the world in terms of particles and energy rather than discrete objects. However, our reference to OBJECT and CONTAINER schemas is meant to reflect the level of everyday human experience. Objects such as cups or bowls are among the most immediate and perceptually accessible entities, and properties like fullness, emptiness, size, or volume are readily perceived without technological mediation (e.g., optical microscope). Our aim is not to make an ontological claim about the ultimate nature of reality, but to describe commonly attested conceptual structures in human cognition.

⁵ Scholarly views differ regarding the extent to which primary metaphors are universal or culturally shaped. In the early works, primary metaphors were argued to arise from recurrent embodied correlations in everyday experience (e.g., Grady, 1997), and thus to reflect broadly shared cognitive patterns. Later research, however, has shown that cultural environments play a role in shaping how these metaphors develop and stabilize in particular communities. For example, Yu (2008) demonstrate that primary metaphors may vary across languages, while Winter and Matlock (2017) suggests that once embodied mappings become entrenched in a speech community, linguistic and cultural practices can reinforce, and in some cases reshape, the underlying conceptual associations. In line with this body of work (e.g., Yu, 2008), our position is that primary metaphors *are more likely* to be universal because they emerge from common bodily experience, whereas complex metaphors, which combine primary mappings with culturally specific beliefs and assumptions, *tend to vary more substantially* across cultures.

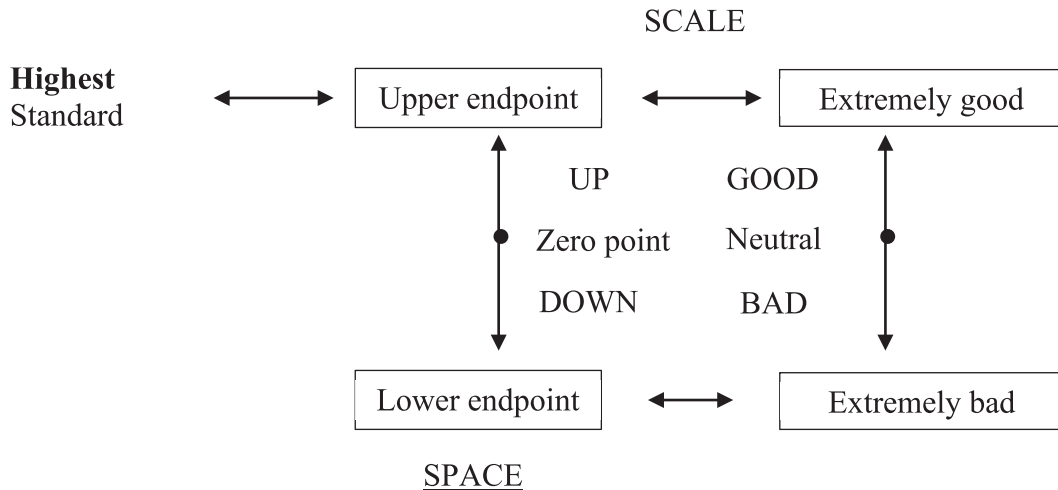


Fig. 3. The cognitive mechanism underlying the primary metaphorical hyperbole of *highest*.

The term “highest” in sentence (5) is a primary metaphorical hyperbole. It draws on the primary metaphor GOOD IS UP, which maps spatial orientation onto an abstract evaluative scale, such that qualities like hygiene standards are conceptualized as vertically arrayed. In this mapping, “height” becomes a proxy for value: the greater the height, the greater the degree of goodness or quality. The superlative form “highest” locates the attribute at the extreme positive end of the constructed scale (lowest, low, average, high, highest) and, in doing so, produces a hyperbole of superiority or excellence.

The envisaged cognitive structure for the primary metaphorical hyperbole “highest” is visualised in Fig. 3. The figure illustrates the conceptual mappings between the source domain of PHYSICAL SPACE and the target domain of QUALITY. As we can see, vertical position in physical space corresponds to the degree of quality in the abstract domain. For instance, upward movement along a vertical axis metaphorically signals improvement or desirability, whereas downward movement indicates decline or inferiority. The spatial term “highest” thus evokes the topmost point on this vertical continuum, metaphorically representing the extreme positive end of a quality scale (GOOD IS UP).

5.2. Source domains of primary metaphorical hyperbole

Turning to the primary metaphors in our corpus, we identified 424 primary metaphorical hyperboles, each grounded in embodied experience and sensory perception. These expressions draw from four main source domains: SPACE, CONTAINER, OBJECT, and TEMPERATURE (Clausner and Croft, 1999; Langacker, 1987). Among these, the source domain OBJECT is the most frequent.⁶

These source domains operate at the most schematic level of metaphor analysis (Kövecses, 2017) and each includes a set of interrelated basic properties that function as concrete source concepts. These source concepts are characterized by scalar parametric valences, meaning that they involve opposing values arranged along a continuum (Yu, 2023). For instance, the SPACE domain can be further subdivided into three distinct sub-structures reflecting everyday perceptions of direction: UP-DOWN, FAR-NEAR, and FRONT-BACK. These correspond to conceptual scales of verticality, proximity, and directionality, respectively.

Fig. 4 shows the frequency distribution of primary metaphorical hyperboles across the four identified source domains. In our corpus, OBJECT and SPACE each have three distinct subdomains, whereas CONTAINER and TEMPERATURE each have one. Subdomains within the same overarching conceptual domain are grouped together and visually distinguished by shared color coding. In the following section, each source domain and its subdomains are examined in detail, supported by linguistic evidence. The analysis demonstrates how these domains underpin the construction of

⁶ While SPACE, CONTAINER, and OBJECT are all spatially grounded source domains, they capture different aspects of spatial experience. In our analysis, SPACE is used to denote directionality and spatial orientation (e.g., upward vs. downward movement). CONTAINER highlights boundedness and fullness/emptiness, and OBJECT foregrounds physical attributes such as size, part-whole structure, or weight.

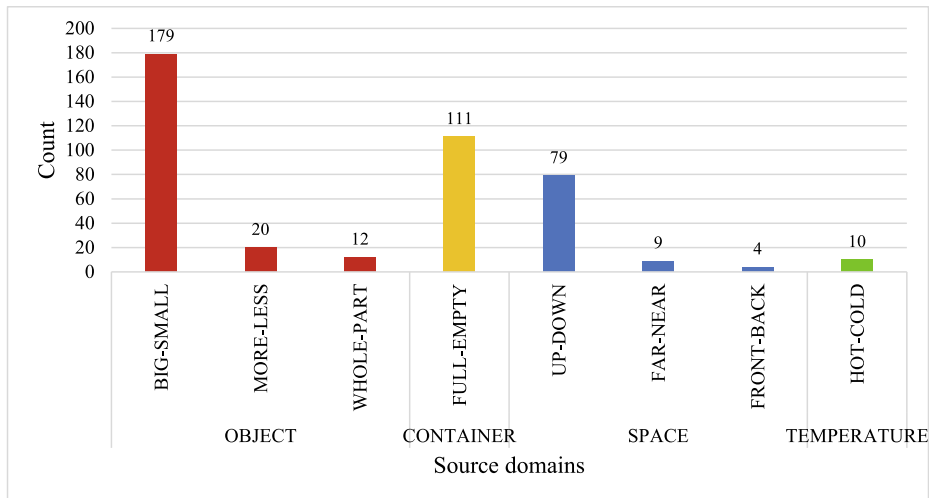


Fig. 4. Major source domains of primary metaphorical hyperboles in the luxury hotel websites corpus.

conceptual scales. These scales provide the cognitive framework for metaphorical hyperbole, allowing meaning to be intensified through scalar exaggeration rooted in embodied experience.

5.3. Primary metaphorical hyperbole and the construction of linguistic scalarity

5.3.1. OBJECT as source domain

Concepts describing the physical properties of objects fall under the OBJECT category, the most productive source domain for primary metaphorical hyperboles in our corpus, with 211 cases. Objects constitute one of the most basic forms of existence in the physical world, and their defining properties are equally basic. They have a size, which may be big or small. They carry quantity, which may be more or less. They possess shape, which may be whole or part. Earlier studies of Chinese have shown that the primary metaphors “IMPORTANCE IS SIZE” and “IMPORTANCE IS WEIGHT” are grounded in this OBJECT domain, and that mappings often occur along three fundamental dimensions: SIZE, WEIGHT, and SOLIDITY (Yu et al., 2017).

Examining our data, luxury hotels frequently construct their discourse of excellence and exclusivity by emphasizing the dimension of size, with 170 instances reflecting the contrast between big and small (BIG–SMALL structure). This is followed by 20 cases that draw on the contrast between more and less (MORE–LESS structure) and 12 cases that highlight the relation between part and whole (PART–WHOLE structure).

(6) The large island bar boasts one of the *largest* selection of whiskies in Hong Kong.

(7) ... a luxurious range of Cantonese specialities that evoke the grandeur of traditional China in an imperial setting.

In Example (6), the adjective “largest” implies the primary metaphor MORE IS BIG, in which the physical domain is projected onto the abstract domain of variety. In this sentence, “largest” no longer refers solely to spatial magnitude but signals the extensive range of available whisky choices. Related instances in our corpus include “biggest,” “extensive,” and “grandeur” (Example (7)), all of which employ positively valenced size-related expressions to construe scale as a marker of importance, prestige, or exclusivity. The evaluative load of “big” words is thus recruited to reinforce an image of abundance.

Of particular interest is the phrase “one of the largest,” in which the mitigator “one of” qualifies the superlative. Rather than diminishing rhetorical impact, this device functions as a hyperbole mitigator, as Ovejas-Ramírez (2021) describes it, allowing speakers to enhance rhetorical appeal while avoiding absolute claims that might be challenged. In effect, the mitigator serves as a safeguard, hedging the risk of overstatement without erasing the value of the superlative. Even in a mitigated form, “largest” continues to foreground extremity and thus retains its intensifying effect.

(8) ...and quality mattress and bedding to ensure your *maximum* comfort.

A further instantiation of the OBJECT metaphor appears in its capacity to construe quantity through the conceptual structure of MORE–LESS. This scalar mapping allows abstract states, such as “comfort,” to be reconceptualized as material entities with measurable dimensions. In Example (8), the phrase “maximum comfort” illustrates this metaphorical operation. The intangible sensation of comfort is treated as a countable substance that can be increased, maximized, or optimized. By means of the superlative “maximum,” the expression places comfort at the extreme positive end of a conceptual scale and indicates an ultimate upper limit.

- (9) . . . into a *whole* new world of Chinese dining. . .
 (10) A *whole* lot of fun and learning adventures await children and their parents. . .

Referring to our corpus, the graded scale can also be instantiated through the PART–WHOLE structure of OBJECT metaphors. This quantitative dimension derives from the meronymic relation between the two components, whereby PART signifies scarcity and is positioned at the negative end of the evaluative scale. At the same time, WHOLE indexes abundance and is located at the positive end. Within the context of promotional hospitality discourse, the semantic value of completeness is strategically invoked to convey the full extent or depth of a desirable quality, whether novelty, enjoyment, or exclusivity, as illustrated in (9) and (10).

5.3.2. CONTAINER as source domain

The CONTAINER domain constitutes a fundamental source domain grounded in our sensorimotor interactions with the physical world. When a liquid is poured into a container, for instance, the mass and volume of the contents increase, and the water level rises until the container is full. This embodied experience gives rise to a scalar structure ranging from empty to full (Johnson, 1987), from which many metaphorical expressions are derived.

In our corpus, metaphors based on the FULL–EMPTY schema frequently highlight utmost completeness, a quality often expressed through lexical items such as “full” or “fully.” These expressions project the embodied experience of spatial saturation onto abstract domains, amplifying evaluative meaning and lending an exaggerated force to promotional discourse.

- (11) The spacious living room is *full* of fun and savvy technology.

In Example (11), the term “full” metaphorically conveys a sense of abundance. While “savvy technology” refers to tangible, material objects, the idea that a room can be “full” of such equipment stretches the conventional physical limits of spatial occupancy, thereby introducing a subtle exaggeration. When “full” is applied to the abstract noun “fun”, it projects the physical sense of containment onto an experiential state, thereby transferring the embodied notion of space to non-material qualities.

5.3.3. SPACE as source domain

Orientational metaphors, also known as SPACE metaphors, draw on fundamental bodily experiences of directionality (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2013) and are highly productive in forming metaphorical hyperbole. The SPACE domain typically structures evaluative meaning by situating qualities of a product along vertical or horizontal axes. As a result, abstract concepts become more concrete and experientially accessible.

In our corpus, we identified 92 such instances, involving orientation-based conceptual pairs such as UP–DOWN, FAR–NEAR, and FRONT–BACK (Clausner and Croft, 1999). Of these, the UP–DOWN configuration is the most salient, accounting for 79 tokens. At the linguistic level, the UP–DOWN schema appears through the well-established conceptual metaphors GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN, which are pervasive in our daily communication. Examples (12) and (13) illustrate this manifestation.

- (12) . . . is committed to the *highest* levels of hygiene.
 (13) One of the world’s *top* female chefs with three Michelin stars. . .

A variant of the metaphor GOOD IS UP is the conventional metaphor GOOD IS FAR, in which the graded scale is grounded in embodied experiences of horizontal locomotion. In the physical world, the farther one travels across space, the greater the distance covered and the greater the effort required. By analogy, the FAR–NEAR schema provides a basis for evaluating qualities: the “farther” a product or service is positioned along this axis, the higher the degree of excellence it is perceived to embody. Similar to the UP–DOWN schema, the FAR–NEAR schema can be recruited in hotel advertising to accentuate premium attributes, as the item “utmost” in example (14).

- (14) ...for the *utmost* in pampering and relaxation.
 (15) Mandarin Oriental, Singapore is one of the world's *foremost* luxury hotels. It is the only hotel in the city that has been awarded Five Star status...

In addition to vertical and horizontal orientations, physical direction can also be conceptualized in terms of forward and backward movement, as captured by the conventional metaphor pairs IMPORTANT IS FRONT and LESS IMPORTANT IS BACK (Horiguchi, 1987). In the FRONT–BACK schema, the scale is metaphorically construed as a continuum extending from back through middle to front, with each successive position signaling increasing importance. This mapping is grounded in embodied and perceptual experience: objects positioned at the front are more visually prominent and cognitively accessible, and therefore more likely to be perceived as central, salient, or significant. “Foremost” in Sentence (15) exemplifies this metaphorical structure in our corpus.

5.3.4. TEMPERATURE as source domain

Previous research has demonstrated cognitive associations between sensory experiences and affective states, with temperature constituting a fundamental dimension of tactile perception (Daprati et al., 2025; Kock and Ringberg, 2019). Empirical evidence increasingly supports this connection. Researchers have demonstrated that physical temperature is correlated with various psychological phenomena, including interpersonal closeness (Fay and Maner, 2012) and trust (Kang et al., 2011). Conversely, exposure to cold temperatures can increase feelings of loneliness (Hong and Sun, 2012). In the present corpus, ten instances of metaphorical hyperbole were identified, in which TEMPERATURE serves as the source domain, with the adjectives “hot” and “cold” functioning as scalar opposites.

- (16) MO Bar is one of Hong Kong's *hottest* dining and drinking spots...

The metaphorical use of “hot” in Example (16) can be interpreted through a conceptual temperature scale, which uses human body temperature (approximately 36–37°C) as its reference point. On this scale, hot occupies the higher end, above warm, lukewarm, or tepid, while cool and cold reside at the lower end (Caballero Rodríguez, 1999). Metaphorically, hot conveys notions of heightened popularity, social appeal, or psychological intensity, as reflected in collocations such as “heat up” or “hot on the market.” Across the corpus, metaphorical temperature terms frequently appear in superlative constructions, such as “hottest” or “warmest,” which reinforce their scalar implications and enhance their hyperbole effect. In this way, the temperature domain leverages sensorimotor experience of bodily warmth and cold to structure evaluations of social, emotional, or commercial qualities, making abstract assessments more grounded.

5.4. Complex metaphorical hyperbole

Primary metaphors are grounded in embodied experience and characterized by minimal conceptual structure. They derive directly from experiential correlations that link subjective expertise and judgment to sensorimotor experience. As such, they tend to be widespread and potentially universal (Yu, 2011a, 2011b). In contrast, complex metaphors are formed by combining one or more primary metaphors with commonplace knowledge and culturally specific beliefs through processes of conceptual blending and elaboration. Building on the notion of a “complex metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), defined as a metaphor constituted by multiple primary metaphors integrated with cultural models or widely held beliefs, this type of hyperbole can be classified as a *complex metaphorical hyperbole* (i.e., complex metaphorical hyperbole = primary metaphorical hyperbole + cultural knowledge; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, pp. 60–73).

As complex metaphorical hyperboles arise from blending multiple conceptual domains, they often afford a high degree of flexibility and creativity. As Grady (2005) observes, such metaphors are particularly well-suited to poetic language and are therefore highly effective in contexts such as luxury hospitality advertising. This tendency is evident in our corpus, which includes expressions such as “heaven” or “paradise”:

- (17) This is *heaven* for guests to enjoy a complex and extraordinary experience in a relaxing atmosphere.

The proper noun “heaven” in Example (17) refers, in a biblical context, to the abode of the righteous dead. Like other nouns denoting locations, such as “gas station,” “playground,” or “paradise,” it is not immediately clear how to construct a scale based solely on its linguistic structure or assign it a specific value on such a scale. However, a pragmatic scale, comprising an ordered set of phases, can be activated by drawing on socio-cultural beliefs, in this case, knowledge of metaphysical models, which allows the expression to be interpreted as gradable (Claridge, 2011). For instance, in

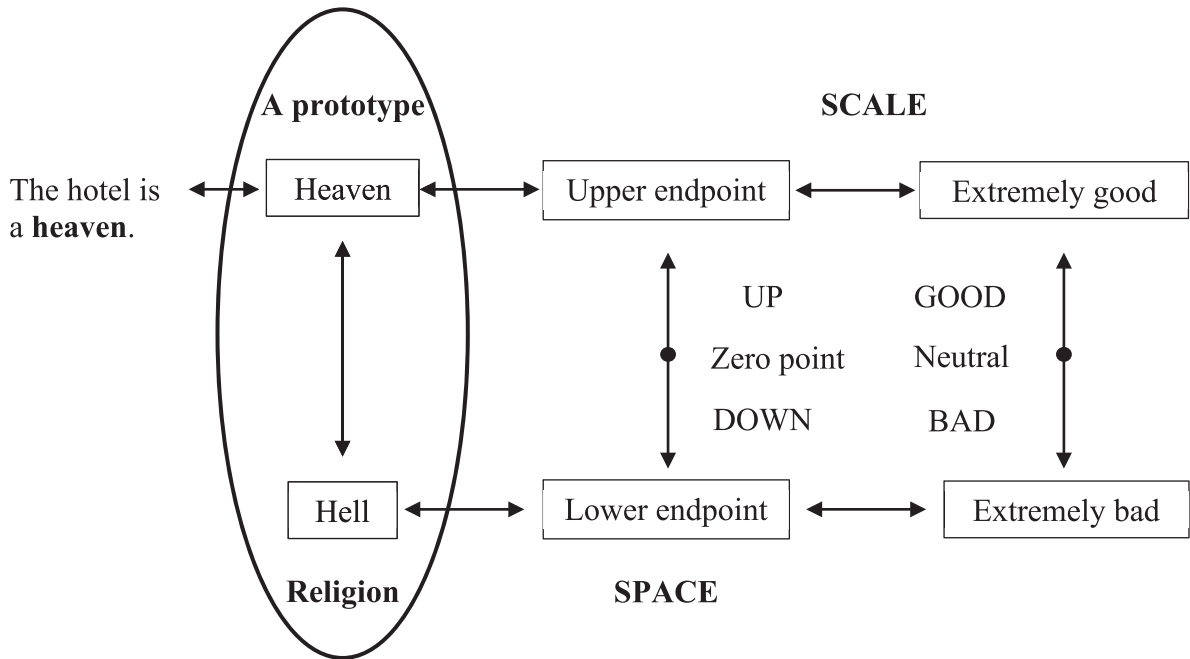


Fig. 5. The cognitive mechanism underlying the complex metaphorical hyperbole of *heaven*.

eschatological mythology, the abodes of the afterlife are conceived as a vertical structure. “Heaven” occupies the interstellar space where the righteous reside, whereas “hell” lies underground, where wicked souls are punished (Grof, 2015).

This vertical contrast, grounded in religious belief, can be further analyzed in terms of more concrete metaphorical pairings derived from perceptual experience, such as GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN. These foundational pairings give rise to a broader conceptual framework in which elevated locations are associated with prosperity. In contrast, lower locations denote deprivation, reflecting the shared linguistic and cultural norms of a speech community (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2013). By integrating sensorimotor perception and encyclopedic knowledge, a non-gradable notion can be converted into a gradable one, which produces a conceptual scale interpretable in pragmatic terms.

The cognitive architecture of complex metaphorical hyperbole is illustrated in Fig. 5. As depicted, the interplay between cultural knowledge (e.g., religious concepts) and embodied spatial experience generates a spatially graded conceptual scale (hell, earth, heaven) that underpins the interpretation of the English expression “heaven,” particularly from a pragmatic standpoint.

5.5. Source domains of complex metaphorical hyperbole

Drawing on our corpus, we identified 470 instances of complex metaphorical hyperbole across 11 distinct source domains. Fig. 6 presents the source domains of complex metaphorical hyperbole identified in our corpus, along with their corresponding frequencies. Rather than arising solely from innate cognitive associations grounded in culture-independent embodied experience, complex metaphorical hyperbole is frequently employed strategically for its discursive utility and interpretive richness (Howe, 2008, p. 21; Tay, 2013).

Among the identified domains, ARTIFACTS was the most frequent source. This domain encompasses references to artistic and cultural productions, including legends and dramas. Other prominent domains are SUPERNATURE and MONARCH. The SUPERNATURE domain comprises elements related to otherworldly forces that transcend everyday logic. In contrast, the MONARCH domain draws on associations with royalty and nobility. In the following section, the analysis considers the three most salient source domains, ARTIFACTS, SUPERNATURE, and MONARCH, and elaborates on how their metaphorical mappings contribute to the construction of graded scales, illustrated through linguistic examples drawn from our corpus.

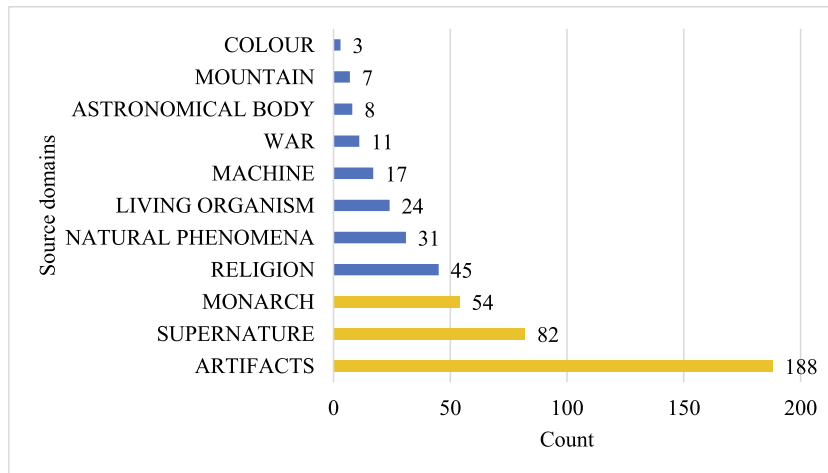


Fig. 6. Source domains of complex metaphorical hyperbole in the luxury hotel websites corpus.

5.6. Complex metaphorical hyperbole and the construction of linguistic scalarity

Lexical items from the ARTIFACTS source domain, such as “legendary,” “dramatic,” and “picture-perfect,” evoke associations with artworks and aesthetic representations. Zooming in on the usage of the ARTIFACTS source domain in our corpus, “legendary” is by far the most productive item (143 instances), followed by “dramatic” (17) and “picture-perfect” (6) (see Table 5).

Examples (18) and (19) illustrate how the lexical item “legendary” is employed to characterize a hotel’s reputation and service:

- (18) Marco Polo Suite with The Peninsula’s legendary service and style. . .
 (19) . . . this is where the *legendary* Asian hospitality of Shangri-La began.

At a surface level, the adjective appears categorical and presents the entity described as occupying an absolute status of cultural prominence. Yet, from a cognitive-semantic perspective, “legendary” operates on an implicit scale when set against antonyms such as “inferior.” Whereas “inferior” denotes a lack of value, quality, or prestige, “legendary” implies the highest possible degree of cultural distinction, often linked to narratives of myth, heritage, and enduring admiration. In this way, a binary contrast between “inferior” and “legendary” is reconceptualized as a scalar opposition. Such cross-domain mapping, from the aesthetic and narrative associations of ARTIFACTS to the evaluative judgments of service quality, enables metaphorical hyperbole to create gradable meaning where no inherent linguistic scale exists. By anchoring hospitality experiences in the cultural resonance of legends, the discourse transforms “legendary” into a hyperbole marker that functions as the extreme positive pole of a conceptual spectrum. This not only amplifies perceived value but also distinguishes luxury hospitality from the mass market through the accumulation of symbolic capital and narrative sophistication (cf. Gurzki et al., 2019).

Compared with utilitarian appeals that emphasize the functional aspects of products, hedonic appeals that highlight attractiveness enhance consumers’ perceptions of luxury and increase their willingness to purchase (Amatulli et al., 2020). Consequently, advertising in the luxury industry often depicts products and experiences that are either impossible or at least difficult to imagine in everyday life (Gurzki et al., 2019, pp. 407–408). This distinctive strategy metaphorically equates attractiveness with magic, explaining the frequent use of metaphors drawn from the supernatural domain in luxury advertising. In our corpus, the SUPERNATURE domain is represented by lexical items such as “enchanted,” “magical,” “magic,” and “enchanted” (see Table 6).

Table 5
Metaphorical keywords related to ARTIFACTS.

Source domain	Metaphorical keywords (Frequency)
ARTIFACTS	legendary (143), dramatic (17), picture-perfect (6)

Table 6
Metaphorical keywords related to SUPERNATURE.

Source domain	Metaphorical keywords (Frequency)
SUPERNATURE	enchancing (21), magical (19), magic (12), enchanted (6), miracle (5)

(20) Enjoy a *spellbinding* stay in a *mesmerising* world of *magic* when you check into our fabulous Rainbow Unicorn Room.

(21) Always been *enchanted* by their gleaming, *magical* surroundings?

Similar to the expression “legendary,” “magic” conveys an absolute quality that an object either possesses or lacks. The binary distinction between “magical” and “non-magical” presents it as a non-gradable concept (Examples (20) and (21)). However, the Oxford Dictionary defines “magical” as “wonderful, extremely pleasant,” which introduces a gradable dimension. This interpretation implies that objects may vary in their degree of appeal or fascination, and that this variation can be organized into a scale describing levels of interest or attraction (mundane, commonplace, neutral, magical). With this structure, the scalar reinterpretation allows “magic” to operate as a hyperbole intensifier in promotional discourse.

Psychological attraction can be conceptualized as embodied physical attraction, in which one entity is oriented toward another. This dynamic has been illustrated by Peña (1999) in terms of the ATTRACTION–REPULSION schema. Within this schema, the luxury hotel is constructed as a forceful attractor that exerts a positive, quasi-magical influence on the guest, who is metaphorically “drawn in” through affective and sensory inducements. Rather than serving as a literal description of appeal, metaphorical hyperbole amplifies the hedonistic dimension of the advertising discourse.

Besides the SUPERNATURE domain, metaphorical mappings from the MONARCH domain further reinforce the guest's exclusivity and elevated status (54 cases). Elements in the MONARCH domain generally convey absolute status rather than a relative or gradable position (see Table 7). In broader systems of social stratification, however, hierarchy is culturally constructed as gradable. The royal family occupies the highest rank due to its power and wealth, whereas commoners or slaves reside at the lower end with limited resources and influence. This hierarchical model aligns with the conventional metaphors GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN, which map social value along a vertical axis.

(22) Live like *royalty* in your *palatial* Sands Suite. . .

(23) 1927 Rooftop Bar is SO/ Singapore's *crowning* jewel.

(24) Pamper yourself and your little ones with a relaxing massage together or spoil your little *prince* and *princess*. . .

In Example (22), rooms at Marina Bay Sands Singapore (MBS) are depicted as palace-like spaces, with “royalty” and “palatial” serving as metaphorical keywords. These terms are also exaggerated, positioning the guest experience at the upper end of a social scale. Example (23) employs the phrase “crowning jewel,” linking the rooftop location to hierarchical status. In Example (24), guests occupy elevated positions in the symbolic social hierarchy (e.g., prince and princess), signaling the highest-status experience. Across these examples, the MONARCH domain integrates the primary metaphor GOOD IS UP with socio-cultural knowledge to produce a gradable scale of luxury, with the highest status at the top.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we have sought to explore the nature and structure of metaphorical hyperbole rather than to challenge existing accounts proposed within frameworks such as Conceptual Blending Theory or Prototype Theory. Instead, it seeks to advance current understanding by offering a fuller empirical and theoretical account of metaphorical hyperbole in authentic discourse.

The first contribution of this study is a more comprehensive empirical profile of metaphorical hyperbole. To date, empirical investigations of its manifestation and frequency in naturalistic corpora have been limited. By combining a

Table 7
Metaphorical keywords related to MONARCH.

Source domain	Metaphorical keywords (Frequency)
MONARCH	palatial (14), crowning (4), regal (4), royale (4), royalty (4)

corpus-based approach with lexical-conceptual analysis, this study identifies the predominant source domains for metaphorical hyperbole in promotional hospitality discourse, including OBJECT, ARTIFACTS, CONTAINER, SPACE, SUPERNATURE, and MONARCH, and uncovers how these source domains systematically shape gradable evaluative language. Luxury hotel advertising conveys a sense of exceptional quality, refined aesthetics, and elevated prestige, and it does so through the juxtaposition of complex metaphorical hyperbole. By layering exaggerated metaphorical expressions that combine sensory and emotional imagery, these texts construct an aspirational world that surpasses ordinary experience.

The second contribution is theoretical. The study proposes a distinction between two types of metaphorical hyperbole with distinct conceptual structures. Primary metaphorical hyperboles derive their scalarity from basic source domains grounded in sensorimotor and perceptual experience, as illustrated by expressions such as “highest standard.” In contrast, complex metaphorical hyperboles integrate both universal cognitive schemas and culturally specific knowledge. For instance, the expression “tourist paradise” combines an embodied spatial schema (e.g., the UP–DOWN orientation) with culturally embedded religious imagery. Through these mechanisms, cross-domain mappings allow non-gradable concepts to be reinterpreted as points on an evaluative scale. The study, therefore, contributes to the broader theorization of figurative language by highlighting a more intricate relationship between metaphor and hyperbole. In many cases, the emergent meaning is not simply a “stronger” version of the metaphor but a distinct construal that neither metaphor nor hyperbole could produce in isolation. This interactional perspective invites further reflection on how scalarity and evaluation are constructed in discourse and has implications for the comprehension of complex figurative language.

However, the study also has several limitations. Because the corpus focuses on tourism English in Hong Kong and Singapore, the findings may not generalize to other genres or cultural contexts. The dominance of positive evaluations in the corpus suggests that further work could extend the analysis to a broader English corpus and, importantly, to other languages in order to examine whether similar source-domain patterns and scalar strategies emerge across typologically and culturally diverse contexts. Moreover, while the present analysis foregrounds the conceptual structure of metaphorical hyperbole, it does not address the temporal order in which metaphor and hyperbole are processed during real-time comprehension. The neurocognitive sequencing of these tropes remains an open empirical question and a promising direction for interdisciplinary research.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Joanna Zhuoan Chen: Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.
Kathleen Ahrens: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision.

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Data availability

The data supporting this study are publicly available in the OSF repository: https://osf.io/bfs47/overview?view_only=163e14de88a94bf9a969343bc4c390bc.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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