

Delineating Extravagance: Assessing Speakers' Perceptions of Imaginative Constructional Patterns

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While the concept of extravagance, used to describe speakers' use of imaginative and noticeable language, has seen a surge in popularity in recent constructionist work, researchers have not yet converged on a set of common criteria for identifying extravagant expressions. In this paper, we discuss a variety of existing definitions and combine them into five main characteristics of extravagant language. We then present the results of a small-scale pilot rating study in which speakers judged extravagant sentences and their non-extravagant paraphrases. Our findings suggest that different constructions vary in their degree of perceived extravagance, and that certain features (e.g. stylistic salience) apply to most extravagant examples while the role of other factors (e.g. the speaker's emotional involvement) may be restricted to a subset of extravagant patterns. We conclude with some open questions concerning the further demarcation and operationalisation of the concept of extravagance.

Keywords: extravagance; Construction Grammar; defining features; rating study

1. Introduction

The concept of extravagance has become increasingly popular in constructionist approaches to language, especially in Diachronic Construction Grammar (e.g. De Wit, Petré, and Brisard 2020; Eitelmann and Haumann in prep.; Kempf and Hartmann 2018; Petré 2017). This is not a

coincidence, as it was popularised by works on language change in general and grammaticalisation in particular: most prominently, Haspelmath (1999) introduced the term ‘extravagance’ as a catchy name for one of Keller’s (1994, 97) “maxims of action”, namely “talk in such a way that you are noticed”. Recent publications have identified a variety of linguistic phenomena – including both diachronic and ongoing developments – as extravagant in this sense; Table 1 provides some examples.¹

Table 1. Examples of extravagant phenomena from the literature. (References marked with an asterisk* do not contain the term “extravagance”, but the authors of the respective papers discussed the same phenomena as instances of “extravagant morphology” at the eponymous workshop at the 2019 SLE conference.)

Phenomenon	References
Earlier changes (now largely completed)	
Use of the English progressive <i>be V-ing</i> in present-tense main clauses	Petré (2017)
Development of English <i>be going to</i> into a future marker	Petré (2016)
French <i>ne ... pas</i> as an emphatic negation marker	Detges and Waltereit (2002); Haspelmath (1999)
Use of respectful nouns as (polite or impolite) pronouns, e.g. Spanish <i>usted</i> (from <i>Vuestra Merced</i> ‘Your Grace’), Japanese <i>kimi</i> (orig. ‘Lord’)	Haspelmath (1999); Ishiyama (2014)

¹ Note that the list in Table 1 could be easily extended if we included phenomena that are discussed under the related terms ‘expressivity’ (e.g. d’Avis and Finkbeiner 2019) and ‘salience’ (e.g. Schmid and Günther 2016). See Haspelmath (1999, 1057) and Schmid (2020, 78-79) for potential differences between these concepts and extravagance.

Item-based lexical extravagance, e.g. use of longer instead of shorter forms (e.g. <i>by means of</i> instead of <i>with</i>), or use of metaphorical nouns (e.g. German <i>Kopf</i> , orig. ‘cup’)	Haspelmath (1999)
Recent developments (still ongoing)	
Extravagant uses of the progressive in English (<i>be V-ing</i>), French (<i>être en train de V-inf</i>) and Dutch (<i>lopen te V-inf</i>), e.g. to express emphasis, irritation or tentativeness	De Wit, Petré, and Brisard (2020)
Snowclones, i.e. semi-formulaic constructions like <i>X is the new Y</i> (e.g. <i>pink is the new black</i>)	Ungerer and Hartmann (2020)
German pseudo-participles, i.e. past participles that lack a verbal counterpart, e.g. <i>be-sonnen-brill-t</i> ‘be-sun-glass-ed’	Kempf and Hartmann (2018, forthc.)
Multi-element English <i>-er</i> nominalisations (‘ <i>fixer-upper</i> constructions’), e.g. <i>stayer-onner-for-nower</i> ‘a politician who had just enough votes to retain their seat in parliament’	Lensch (2018)*
Phrasal compounds in English (e.g. <i>make-your-stomach-hurt difficult</i>) and German (e.g. ‘ <i>Man-muss-doch-über-alles-reden-können</i> ’- <i>Credo</i> ‘one-should-be-able-to-talk-about-everything motto’)	Günther, Kotowski, and Plag (2020)*; Hein (2017)*

Table 1 shows that the concept of extravagance has been applied across languages to a heterogeneous set of target phenomena, spanning verbal syntax, phrasal idioms, individual lexical items and morphological processes (and often straddling the boundaries between those areas). While this illustrates the flexibility of the concept, it also hints at some of the challenges faced by current accounts of extravagance. In particular, the studies listed above use a number of different criteria for establishing the extravagant nature of their target phenomena. Researchers have not yet converged on a definition of the concept that would unify those different features.

In this short paper, we summarise the characteristics of extravagant expressions that have been previously suggested, and examine their validity (in a preliminary fashion) by comparing

them against native speakers' perceptions of selected constructions in a pilot rating study. In Section 2, we discuss some existing definitions and highlight important commonalities but also points of disagreement among them. We then extract five main features of extravagance from the previous definitions, which we suggest provide a more useful heuristic for characterising the prototypically structured category of extravagance. In Section 3, we present the results of our pilot study, in which speakers were asked to rate extravagant sentences along several of the previously identified criteria. In Section 4, we summarise our main findings and point to some open questions that merit further research.

2. Unifying previous definitions of extravagance

While existing definitions of extravagance display considerable overlap, they also differ in some of the key characteristics attributed to extravagant language. Consider the four definitional statements in (1–4). Haspelmath's (1999) original description in (1) identifies extravagant expressions via their intended pragmatic effect on the hearer – their attention-getting potential – which is motivated, in relatively broad terms, by the 'imaginative and vivid' nature of the linguistic items. While the potential to 'stand out' is echoed by Petré (2017) in (2), his account emphasises another, more speaker-oriented property of extravagant language, namely its emphatic nature as an expression of the speaker's emotional involvement (see also Petré 2016, 125). Interestingly, however, Haspelmath (1999, 1065, fn. 9) rejects speakers' emotions as a central criterion for extravagant language: "Not the speaker's emotions are at issue, but the hearer's reactions."²

(1) "The crucial point is that speakers not only want to be clear or 'expressive,' sometimes they also want their utterance to be imaginative and vivid — they want to be little 'extravagant poets' in order to be noticed, at least occasionally." (Haspelmath 1999, 1057)

² As an anonymous reviewer rightly points out, the distinction between speaker- and hearer-relatedness is somewhat blurred since speakers are likely to express emotional involvement deliberately in order to achieve hearer-oriented effects (e.g. attention). Nevertheless, we believe that the speaker's signalling of personal involvement is not a *necessary* condition for gaining the hearer's attention, which means that the two factors can to some extent be assessed independently.

(2) “[W]hen a speaker feels strongly connected (emotionally) to the contents of their statement, they will want this statement to stand out among other statements by making it somehow more emphatic.” (Petré 2017, 229)

(3) “Extravagance can be conceived of as a (more or less) deliberate deviation from established norms that evokes surprise or attention.” (Kempf and Hartmann *forthc.*)

(4) “We have defined extravagant language use as a signaling mechanism that consists in the exploitation of an unconventional construction in a given context as a way for speakers to indicate that there is something non-canonical about the situation that they are reporting.” (De Wit, Petré, and Brisard 2020, 33)

Moving on to the third definition in (3), Kempf and Hartmann (*forthc.*) derive the attention-getting potential of extravagant language from a deliberate violation of linguistic norms. Their view places emphasis on the notion of surprisal, which is related to the lower predictability and thus (relative) novelty of extravagant expressions. This seems to conflict with De Wit, Petré, and Brisard’s (2020, 2) argument that extravagance is not necessarily tied to the ‘novelty’ of an expression since conventional patterns like the English, French and Dutch progressives continue to serve extravagant functions in present-day use, e.g. to express emphasis, irritation or tentativeness. The two views may, however, be reconciled if one assumes that constructions are only conventionalised for use in specific contexts, and that the progressive consequently serves as a fully conventional marker of certain temporal-aspectual conditions, but is ‘novel’ and extravagant when it occurs in unusual contexts like the ones mentioned above.

Notably, in De Wit, Petré, and Brisard’s (2020) own definition of extravagance in (4), the authors discuss an additional property of extravagant expressions, namely that speakers use them to highlight the non-canonical nature of the situation to which they are referring. This criterion differs from the ones discussed so far in that it concerns (speakers’ perceptions of) the real-world conditions reported by extravagant language, rather than the unconventional status of the linguistic items themselves. While it is not difficult to see how the two may often be correlated, one can also imagine cases in which linguistically inconspicuous expressions are used to describe non-canonical situations in the real world, or contexts in which unconventional language is used to refer to ordinary, predictable events. Blurring the boundary between ‘linguistic’ and

‘extralinguistic’ extravagance might therefore be problematic; we will return to this point in section 3 below.

To sum up the discussion thus far, the previous research on extravagance has produced a number of criteria that can help delineate the concept. At the same time, individual definitions tend to include only a subset of those features, and researchers tend to emphasise certain criteria at the expense of others, often without discussing reasons for their choices. In an attempt to combine the strengths of the different definitions, Table 2 groups the previous suggestions into five main characteristics of extravagant language. The first four features have been addressed in the discussion above. The final criterion (redundancy) is an additional factor which illustrates particularly clearly that the suggested characteristics should be understood as components of a prototypically structured category ‘extravagance’ rather than as necessary and sufficient features.

Table 2. Five characteristics of extravagance in the literature

Characteristic	Example references
‘Special effects’: extravagant expressions are used by speakers to be noticed, stand out, and create attention or surprise; they emphasise the content of the message and represent it in a vivid and imaginative way	Haspelmath (1999); and many others
Deviation from the norm: extravagant expressions deviate from linguistic norms or expectations, as established through conventions of usage (and usually formally codified)	De Wit, Petré, and Brisard (2020); Kempf and Hartmann (forthc.); Schmid (2020)
Speaker’s emotional involvement: extravagant expressions express the speaker’s emotional (or even physical) involvement in the contents of their message	Petré (2016, 2017)
Extralinguistic non-canonicity: extravagant expressions refer to (speakers’ perceptions of) non-canonical situations in the real world	De Wit, Petré, and Brisard (2020)

Redundancy: extravagant expressions contain more material and/or information than is strictly necessary	Detges and Waltereit (2002); Petré (2016, 2017)
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Naturally, the viability and relative importance of the – tentative – criteria summarised in Table 2 remains subject to discussion and empirical assessment. In section 3, we will conduct a preliminary version of such an assessment by comparing the proposed characteristics of extravagant expressions against speakers’ perceptions of selected constructions in a small-scale rating study.

3. Language users’ perception of extravagant constructions: A rating study

In order to assess how native speakers perceive constructions that are frequently discussed as extravagant, we designed an online survey in which volunteer participants were asked to rate 14 stimuli regarding a number of parameters, including e.g. their vividness and the speaker’s emotional involvement. Two of the 14 stimuli were practice items shown at the beginning of the survey to familiarize participants with the rating scheme. For the remaining 12 items, we worked with stimuli pairs consisting of a sentence that makes use of an extravagant construction on the one hand and a non-extravagant paraphrase on the other. The extravagant sentences were modelled after examples previously discussed in the literature (see Table 1); as an additional phenomenon not mentioned in Table 1, we included *shm*-reduplication (*rules*, *shmules*), which has been discussed as an expressive construction by e.g. Zwicky and Pullum (1987). The paraphrases were lexically as similar as possible to their extravagant counterparts. Each participant saw six extravagant stimuli and six paraphrases, i.e. only one member of each pair. The order of the trials was randomised. For each item, participants were asked to answer six questions on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much*. All questions related to features that have been previously proposed as common characteristics of extravagant expressions (see Table 2).

The survey was hosted on Ibex Farm (Drummond 2020), and participants were recruited via social media. Overall, 37 participants completed the study. Six participants were excluded as they did not self-identify as native speakers of English. The mean age of the remaining participants was 33.3 (median = 29.5). Most of the participants named the UK as the country in which they

acquired English (18), followed by the USA (7), New Zealand (3), South Africa (1), Canada (1) and unreported (1). The full results can be accessed at <https://osf.io/m4w52/>.

For visualizing the results, we used the R package *likert* (Bryer 2019) for R (R Core Team 2020). Figure 1 shows the results for all six questions for one of the twelve pairs of stimulus sentences, while Figure 2 shows the results for one of the rating categories for all stimulus pairs. These two examples already illustrate that the sentences representing extravagant constructions and their paraphrases are in many cases rated differently by the participants. For example, *She was a formidable digger-outer of facts* is generally seen as less well-formed (i.e., ‘following the rules of language’) than its paraphrase from a normative point of view, but it is also considered more surprising and stylistically more striking. However, there is much variation between the different stimuli, which can be expected given the fact that some represent patterns that arguably used to be extravagant – such as the progressive – but have lost much of their extravagance over time. Even though, for example, some grammars see the use of the progressive with state verbs like *love*, *like*, *hate* as ungrammatical and De Wit, Petré, and Brisard (2020) regard progressives with stative as well as performative verbs (e.g. *warn*, *advise*) as extravagant in present-day usage, our informants rated *I’m loving my new car* as only slightly less grammatical than *I love my new car*. At the same time, however, they rated the progressive variant as ‘more vivid’. In the case of *I advise you to take this seriously* vs. *I’m advising you to take this seriously*, the former variant was even judged to be slightly more stylistically striking, as Figure 2 shows.

When it comes to the stylistic salience of the different constructions, the most striking differences between the extravagant constructions and their paraphrases can be observed in the case of *the mother of all X*, *X it up*, multi-element nominalisations, and *shm*-reduplication, as shown in Figure 2. Regarding the speaker’s emotional involvement, the judgments for extravagant stimuli sentences and paraphrases are relatively similar in most cases, except for *The sportsman was playing like a pro during training*/*The sportsman was proing it up during training*, *The country faced an extreme economic crisis*/*The country faced the mother of all economic crises*, and *We went to a very fancy restaurant*/*We went to a fancy-schmancy restaurant*, where in each case the extravagant variant was judged as conveying more emotional involvement (see the additional figures in the ‘Wiki’ tab of the online repository linked above). The latter two examples, along with *I’m loving my new car* and *the politician is a stayer-onner-for-nower*, were also in general judged as more vivid than their paraphrases, whereas the vividness judgements only

differed to a small extent in the case of the other example sentences. Finally, no major differences were apparent between the extravagant constructions and their paraphrases in terms of how unusual the situation or fact described by the sentences seemed to participants.³

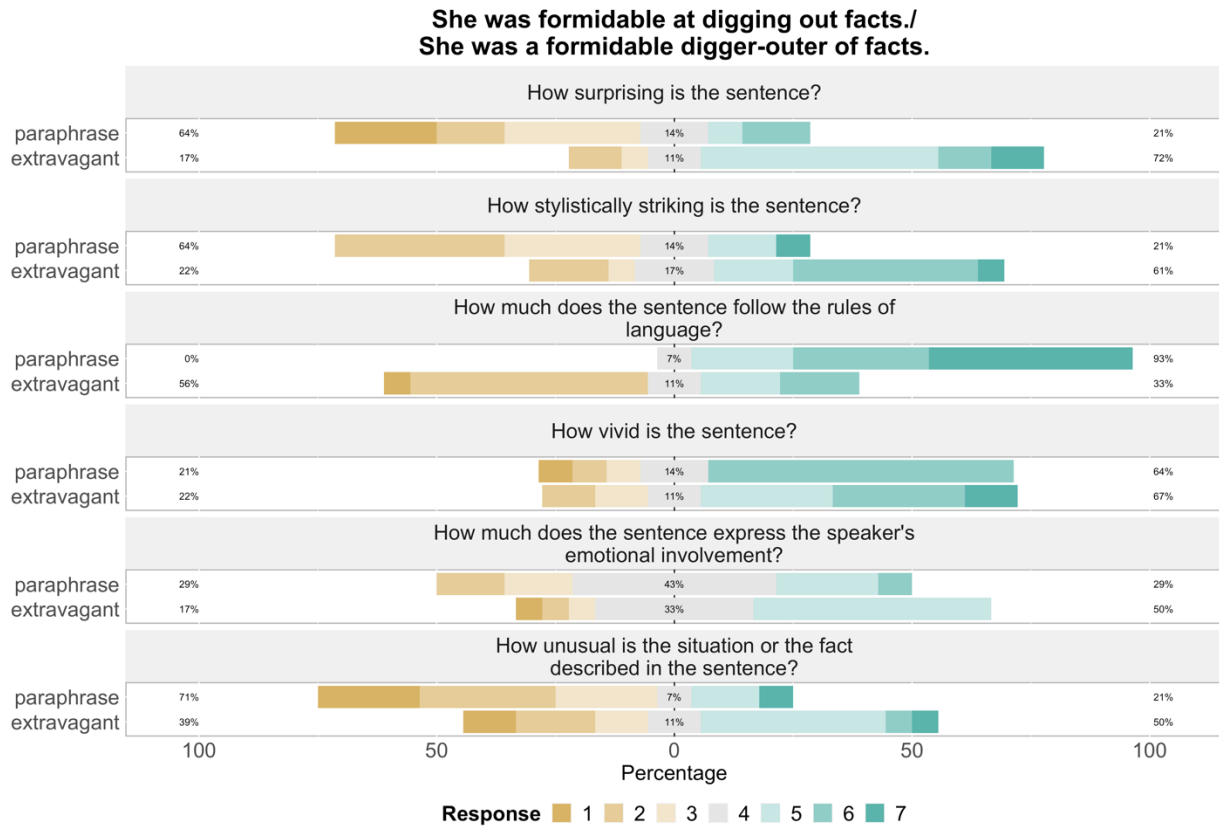


Figure 1: Ratings for one of the stimulus sentence pairs.

³ A reviewer comments that we were not deliberately manipulating the (non-)canonicity of the situation described in the stimulus pairs, so we are unlikely to find an effect. The rationale of our study, however, was different: we tested to what extent certain features apply across a sample of constructions which share no other characteristic than having been previously discussed as ‘extravagant’ in the literature. Another reviewer rightly points out that our survey question does not distinguish between ‘objectively’ non-canonical situations and speakers’ ‘subjective’ perception of them. This is true, but it seems unlikely that this ambiguity can solely account for the differences from the other parameters.

How stylistically striking is the sentence?

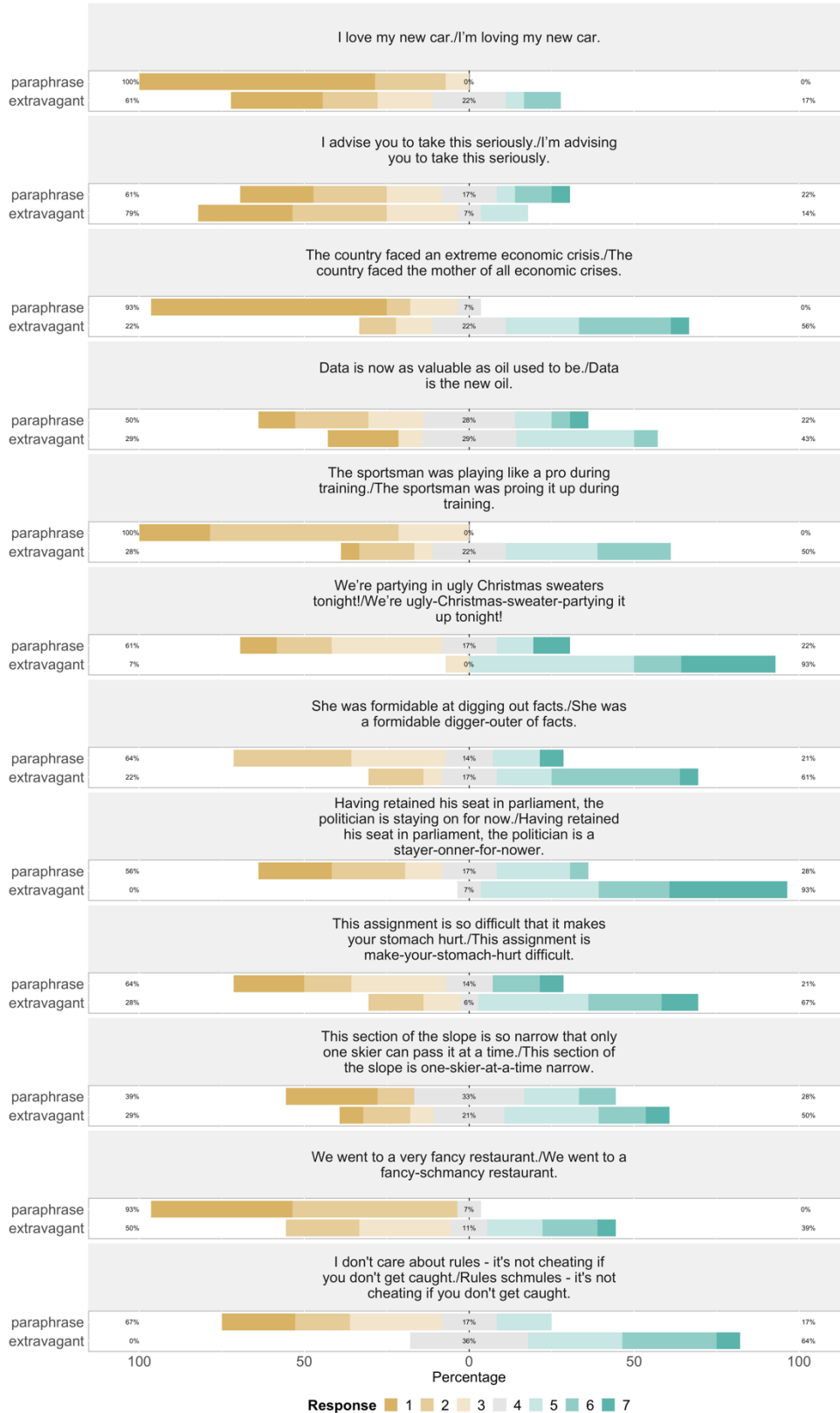


Figure 2: Results for all stimulus sentences for one of the rating categories.

The limitations of such a small pilot study should be kept in mind: as we are working with a small set of example sentences, some of which convey more unusual or salient propositions than others, it is not always clear to what extent the judgments were influenced by the content of the stimuli, despite the systematic comparison to the paraphrases. Some of the questions may also have been interpreted differently by different participants (e.g. ‘How vivid is this sentence?’). Moreover, the survey was distributed to volunteers via social media platforms, so potential biases among the participant pool (e.g. towards language professionals) cannot be ruled out. Despite these caveats, the results show clearly that many of the constructions that are frequently discussed as extravagant are indeed perceived as notable or deviant compared to their non-extravagant paraphrases. Thus, they provide empirical support for the theoretical construct of extravagance, and they can help assess the degree to which different constructions can be considered extravagant. For instance, the results suggest that the *mother-of-all* construction, *doubler-upper* nouns, and *shm*-reduplication are perceived as particularly extravagant, while e.g. *X is the new Y* is not perceived as particularly striking or surprising. The observation that the ratings for the different categories differ quite considerably in some cases is in line with the theoretical considerations discussed in Section 2, where we have argued that ‘extravagance’ can be conceived of as a prototypically structured category.

It is also interesting to observe that in some categories, the ratings obtained for extravagant constructions and the paraphrases differ quite strongly (e.g. for the question how stylistically striking a sentence is), while in others (e.g. emotional involvement), the ratings hardly differ in most cases. This might suggest that emotional involvement, as well as the non-canonicity of the real-world situation, are not inherent features of extravagant constructions, even though extravagant expressions might be especially likely to occur in contexts in which these conditions are fulfilled.

4. Conclusion

Since the pragmatic and interactional dimensions of constructions are playing an increasingly central role in current constructionist approaches, it comes as no surprise that the concept of

extravagance has gained popularity in Construction Grammar. In this paper, we have presented a synthesis of previous definitions of the concept which comprises five main characteristics of extravagant constructions. We hope that this overview will help researchers keep track of the different components potentially contributing to the extravagant potential of linguistic expressions. In addition, we have reported the results of a pilot study in which participants rated a sample of constructions along several parameters that have been suggested as defining features of extravagance. The results show that the extravagant sentences were indeed judged to be more stylistically striking and more surprising, but they also demonstrate that there are clear differences regarding the degree to which different constructions are perceived as extravagant. Moreover, while the preliminary data should be interpreted with some caution, the results indicate that some of the previously suggested characteristics apply equally across a range of extravagant constructions, whereas others are restricted to specific extravagant phenomena and thus perhaps less central to the overall definition of the concept.

This leads us to an important desideratum for future research: previous studies have convincingly argued that extravagance plays a role in grammaticalisation processes. But like other aspects of semantics and pragmatics, the extravagant potential of constructions to attract speakers' attention is subject to bleaching (e.g. Dahl 2001; Haspelmath 1999). Thus, it is still an open question how we can assess degrees of extravagance, and whether a gradual loss in the extravagant potential of an expression can be tracked in corpora. There have been some recent attempts to quantify extravagance (De Wit, Petré, and Brisard 2020; Petré 2016, 2017), but it is worth noting that these approaches use specific criteria to operationalise the concept, some of which (e.g. the speaker's emotional involvement) may not be equally appropriate for a wider range of extravagant phenomena.

Another open question concerns the relation between extravagance and other, partly overlapping concepts such as expressivity, salience and evaluativity (see footnote 1 above), all of which relate to pragmatic and interpersonal dimensions of linguistic constructions. Given the 'interactional turn' in many areas of usage-based linguistics, including Cognitive Linguistics and Construction Grammar (see Zima and Brône 2015), these often neglected dimensions have recently come to the centre of attention in constructionist approaches. While previous work has convincingly shown that they can contribute to explanatory accounts of language variation and

change, there is still some conceptual and terminological groundwork to be done, and we hope that the present paper can serve as a first stepping stone towards that goal.

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