



Reflexive hyperbole, both ways

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Abstract

This article continues the author's exploration of a substantially neglected form of hyperbole that he calls reflexive hyperbole. Such hyperbole can arise as one meaning option for sentences such as “*Alex Salmond was the Scottish National Party*,” “*When Jack watches Supergirl films, he becomes Supergirl*,” “*I am England*” and “*Teenagers are money for social media companies*.” Such sentences can convey that the two things mentioned have some graded relationship to a remarkably high degree—for example that Alex Salmond was *associated in the public mind with* the Scottish National Party to a remarkably high degree. The conveying is done by hyperbolically identifying the two things (Salmond and the party, in that example). This phenomenon can arise with an indefinitely wide range of graded relationships, but its different manifestations are deeply unified because the relationship has to be of a special type that the author calls “broadly reflexive.” A relationship is broadly reflexive when an item of the appropriate sort normally bears the relationship to *itself* to an extremely high degree. The present article extends the study of reflexive hyperbole by focusing on “two-way” cases, as for instance in “*I am England and England is me*.” The article is theoretical and conducts an initial exploration of the wide variety of ways in which such cases can, in principle, be interpreted by a hearer. © 2023 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article is a sequel to [Barnden \(2015, 2018, 2022\)](#), and continues the exploration of a substantially neglected form of hyperbole that I call *reflexive hyperbole*. This can arise with sentences such as “*Alex Salmond was the Scottish National Party*,” “*When Jack watches Supergirl films, he becomes Supergirl*,” “*I am England*” and “*Teenagers are money for social media companies*.” In suitable contexts, such sentences can convey that the two things mentioned have some graded relationship to a remarkably high degree. For example, for two of the sentences just shown, we could have: *Jack mentally identifies with Supergirl to a remarkably high degree when he watches Supergirl films*; and *Alex Salmond was associated in the public mind with the Scottish National Party to a remarkably high degree*. These interpretations are hyperbolic in the special, reflexive-hyperbolic, way, as will be explained. Furthermore, the way this hyperbole works deeply unifies examples such as the ones just listed even though apparently they are highly diverse.

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Reflexive-hyperbolic interpretations can arise with an indefinitely wide range of graded relationships, but the relationships have to be *broadly reflexive*. I define a relationship as broadly reflexive when items typically bear the relationship to *themselves* to an extremely high degree. For instance, any given thing is, trivially, associated with itself in the public mind to a remarkably high degree. The reflexive quality leads to the possibility of the special type of hyperbole in a simple and direct way, as is explained below.

The present article goes beyond the above predecessor articles by exploring “two-way” cases, such as “*Orpheus was Armgart [and] Armgart [was] Orpheus*” (Jenkins 1989), concerning the mythological character Orpheus and an opera-singer called Armgart. The article is an initial, purely theoretical exploration of the wide variety of reflexive-hyperbolic interpretations that two-way cases could in principle be given by hearers. The main focus of interest is on: whether both *BE-clauses* of the sentence (e.g., “*Orpheus was Armgart*” and “*Armgart was Orpheus*”) could, on the one hand, mean the same thing via reflexive hyperbole; in what ways the meanings could, on the other hand, differ from each other; and what additional pragmatic effects such as additional emphasis could arise as compared with a “one-way” case like “*Armgart was Orpheus*.” When the meanings could differ, the focus is on whether the same or different broadly reflexive relationships could underlie both clauses: in our example, perhaps the first clause means in context that Orpheus was remarkably *like* Armgart in some contextually-relevant respect, but the second means that Armgart was, remarkably strongly, *associated in the public mind with* Orpheus. When the relationship might be the same for both clauses, and has a directional quality, the focus is on whether the direction of the relationship could be the same or should be reversed. For example, might both clauses of “*Sally is Beyoncé and Beyoncé is Sally*” mean that Sally mentally identifies with Beyoncé remarkably strongly, with the second clause included merely for extra emphasis, or would only the first clause have that meaning, with the second having instead the reversed meaning that Beyoncé mentally identifies with Sally?

The plan of the article is as follows. Section 2 provides the necessary background for the rest of the paper, summarizing some of the theory presented in Barnden (2015, 2018, 2022). This section gives examples of one-way sentences of the type of interest, mentions some illustrative reflexive-hyperbolic meanings for them, and briefly summarizes the nature of broad reflexivity and how it allows for reflexive hyperbole. Section 3 goes beyond that background by exploring how the reversal of a one-way case—for instance, from “*Orpheus was Armgart*” to “*Armgart was Orpheus*”—might or might not lead to a change in meaning or to pragmatic effects. This allows Section 4 to discuss the possible ways in which two-way cases might be interpreted reflexive-hyperbolically. Section 5 concludes.

2. REFLEXIVE HYPERBOLE AND BROADLY REFLEXIVE RELATIONSHIPS

2.1. Some examples and initial explanation

Consider sentences (1) to (5) and some possible reflexive-hyperbolic meanings for them, as shown. While giving this list of examples, I do not explain why the stated meanings are appropriate and why I call them “reflexive hyperbolic,” as the intent is first to display the diversity of the ways the phenomenon can be manifested in language. But afterwards, I explain the deep, perhaps surprising way in which they are unified, through manifesting reflexive hyperbole.

(1) *Armgart was Orpheus*.¹

Some reflexive-hyperbolic meanings, concerning opera-singer Armgart and mythological character Orpheus, are: Armgart was *associated in the public mind* with the character Orpheus to a remarkably strong degree; Armgart was remarkably *like* Orpheus [in some particular, contextually relevant respect]; Armgart *acted* the character Orpheus remarkably convincingly.

(2) *Noel Coward is England*.²

One reflexive-hyperbolic meaning: Noel Coward *indicates* England to a remarkably strong degree, in the sense that thinking about Noel Coward leads, with remarkable directness and definiteness, to thinking about England.

(3) *Teenagers' passions are money for social-media companies*.³

One reflexive-hyperbolic meaning: The passions of teenagers *lead to* money for the companies in a remarkably direct and definite way.

¹ Abstracted from example (7) in section 4, namely “*Orpheus was Armgart, Armgart Orpheus*,” in Jenkins (1989: 121).

² Abstracted from example (11) in section 4, namely “*I am England and England is me*,” said by the English playwright Noel Coward (Hoare 2004), and mentioned briefly in Barnden (2022).

³ Invented example, but see below.

(4) *The Ruritanian government is the Mafia.*⁴

One reflexive-hyperbolic meaning: The government of Ruritania is *integrated with* the Mafia to a remarkably large extent.

(5) *Alex Salmond was the Scottish National Party.*⁵

One reflexive-hyperbolic meaning: Alex Salmond (one-time leader of the Scottish National Party) made a remarkably important *contribution to* the Party as a *part of* it. The type of contribution may be suggested by context (including the hearer's existing knowledge). E.g., the context might imply that he contributed a remarkably large amount of the visibility of the party, or it might imply that he contributed a remarkably important aspect of its thinking (principles, policies, etc.), or ...

As indicated in footnotes above, examples (1), (2) and (5) are “one-way” examples derived from some of the two-way examples in Section 4. However, (1), (2) and (5) are similar to natural one-way examples that are common in ordinary discourse. The same applies to the invented examples (3) and (4). In addition, all the examples have analyses similar to related (natural one-way) examples in Barnden (2015), Barnden (2018) or Barnden (2022), featuring entities other than the individual people, types of people, organizations, geographical locations, etc. in the examples here. In other words, there is nothing special about the examples in this section.

The reflexive-hyperbolic meanings shown are not exhaustive—in suitable contexts, there may be other plausible ones. Also, there may in context be plausible meanings that are not reflexive-hyperbolic. As just one simple illustration of this, (1) in a suitable context could easily mean merely that Armgart acts the part of Orpheus, in some particular theatrical production under discussion, without implying that he acts the part at all convincingly. In another context it might simply mean that the same person has two names, Armgart and Orpheus.

Each example above features what I will call a “BE clause.” A BE-clause mainly consists of two noun phrases linked by a form of the verb *to be* or a dynamic version of *to be*, notably *to become* or *to turn into*.⁶

The emphasizing of these copulas such as by capitalization (as would be the case in “*Armgart WAS Orpheus*”) or use of adverbs such as “*literally*” (as in “*The Ruritanian government is literally the Mafia*”) often arises in discourse, but it is not obligatory. Also, Barnden (2015) and Barnden (2018) discuss the way BE-clauses can appear in “corrective juxtapositions,” as in “*Alex Salmond wasn't just a part of the Scottish National Party—he was the Party.*” (We should note in passing that there is other linguistic clothing for reflexive hyperbole that does not involve BE-clauses on the model above. We will see one example in Section 4.2.4. Additionally, Barnden (2017) gives a principled account of how the word “literally” is often used as a sort of intensifier, other than in BE-clauses. This account itself rests on reflexive hyperbole.)

How exactly are the meanings listed above *hyperbolic* ones at all, and why should we say the hyperbole is of a special, *reflexive* variety? We can get a start on these questions by considering (1) (“*Armgart was Orpheus*”). I first consider a meaning listed above that is based on the *Being-Like* relationship, namely the meaning that Armgart was remarkably like Orpheus, as follows.

Being Like, in any particular respect, has a *reflexive* quality. Whatever grounds for likeness are considered, *nothing is more like a given thing Y than Y itself is*. That is, anything Y is like *itself* on those grounds to the maximum possible degree that likeness can go to, which I take to be 100%. So, a hearer of “X is Y”, for different things X and Y, can first pretend that it is saying that X is the very same thing as Y, and thus first treat it as if it made the claim that X (being in fact Y itself) is like Y to degree 100% [on the grounds in question]. The hearer can then exit from the pretence and take that claim to be hyperbolic for X being, merely, *remarkably like* Y on those grounds. Thus, the hearer can take (1) to say that Armgart was remarkably like Orpheus, in some contextually-relevant way. What that way is—what the grounds are—may or may not be evident to the hearer. In some circumstances he may only be able to, or may only need to, surmise that there exists *some* way that the speaker has in mind.

Another meaning stated above for (1) uses a relationship I call *Being Publicly Associated with*. It arises when, in the minds of many of the members of some community, an entity that is well-known to that community is associated with

⁴ Invented example, but see below. Ruritania is a famous fictional country.

⁵ Abstracted from “*For many, he was the party and the party was him*” (heard on Sky News television programme, 30 May 2018, where “*he*” is Alex Salmond and “*the party*” is the Scottish National Party).

⁶ In Barnden (2022) I called BE-clauses “equative” clauses but here I revert to terminology in Barnden (2018).

another such entity, in the sense that thinking of either entity leads members of the community easily to thinking of the other. Trivially, the relationship is reflexive in that any entity that is known to a community is, within that community, publicly associated with *itself* to the maximum possible degree. So a hearer can initially take “X is Y” to claim that X and Y are publicly associated to the maximum degree (given that X just is Y), and can then take this claim to be hyperbolic for X and Y being, merely, *remarkably strongly*, associated publicly. Thus, (1) can have the hyperbolic meaning that Armgart was, with remarkable strength, associated publicly with Orpheus.

I leave the remaining meaning listed above for (1), about convincing dramatic *Acting*, to [Section 2.5](#).

The meaning stated above for example (2), “*Noel Coward is England*,” rests on a relationship that I call *Indicating* and that is similar to a unidirectional version of *Being Publicly Associated with*. X *Indicates* Y when, if you notice or think of X, then you are facilitated to notice or think of Y. The intensity of an *Indication* is context-sensitive and can involve such matters as the accuracy, definiteness, directness and/or long-lastingness involved in the transition from X to Y. Trivially, anything Y *Indicates* itself maximally strongly in all such respects under all circumstances, and thus has a reflexive quality. So “X is Y” for different things X and Y can be taken ostensibly to claim that X (being just Y) *Indicates* Y with maximum strength, and thus hyperbolically to claim that X *Indicates* Y with remarkably high strength.

The meaning given above for (3) (“*Teenagers’ passions are money for social media companies*”) is about the *Leading to* relationship. X *Leads to* Y if it’s the case that, given that X is present (or has the nature it has, or is the case), then also, as a consequence, Y is or will later be present (or have the nature it has, or be the case). I take it that *Leading to* is graded by how direct and definite the consequence is. Trivially, the relationship has a reflexive quality because any Y whatever leads to *itself* to the maximal possible degree: if Y is present (etc.) then with absolute directness and directness, Y itself is present (etc.). Hence, through that reflexivity, hyperbole analogous to the types seen above is possible.

I take *Being Integrated with* in the meaning given above for (4) (“*The Ruritanian government is the Mafia*”) to be a matter of items overlapping with each other, or being enmeshed or entwined with each other in some way. Hyperbole like that in (1) to (3) is possible since the integration relationship again has a reflexive quality: anything overlaps with *itself*, and is enmeshed and entwined with *itself*, to the maximal possible extent. Nothing can overlap (etc.) something Y more than Y itself does.

Finally, we consider (5), “*Alex Salmond was the Scottish National Party [SNP]*,” taken to mean that Salmond made a remarkably important *Contribution to* the SNP as *Part of* it. The contribution can be of any type, so let us focus for definiteness on contributions that parts (e.g., party members) of a political party make to the party’s thinking. However important such a contribution is, and however much of the whole the part takes up, the *whole* of the SNP obviously contributes at least as much as the part does to the SNP’s thinking. The whole contributes what the part contributes and possibly more. So, the whole of the SNP makes the *maximally important* contribution to the thinking of the whole SNP that is possible for *any* part. Analogous comments apply to any other type of contribution. Now, it is standard in the theory of parthood (see, e.g., [Varzi 2019](#)), to take any whole to be a part of itself. (The whole of any chair is a part of that chair, the whole of any political party is a part of that party, and so forth, although we do not normally need to allude to such trivial facts.) So, the *Contribution as Part to* relationship has a reflexive quality, much as with the other relationships above. For a given type of contribution, any whole makes to itself the maximally important contribution that any part of that whole can. Thus, (5) can be taken ostensibly to say that Alex Salmond makes the maximally important contribution (of a type that is contextually relevant) to the SNP, and accordingly it can be taken hyperbolically to say that he makes a remarkably important contribution.

And, much as with the issue of the hearer’s knowledge or otherwise of contextually-relevant likeness grounds in the case of *Being Like*, the hearer may or may not have, or may or may need to wonder about, a specific idea about what the contextually-relevant type of contribution is.

Part of the point of the present subsection has been to argue that, despite the apparent diversity of examples (1) to (5), they are all about a relationship that has a reflexive quality. The relationships we have so far discussed are *Contributing as Part to*, *Being Integrated with*, *Being Like*, *Being Publicly Associated with*, *Indicating*, and *Leading to*. Although these relationships are different from each other, and are different from further relationships discussed in [Barnden \(2018, 2022\)](#), their reflexivity gives rise to the possibility of hyperbolic interpretation in the simple, uniform way presented. The examples are deeply unified because of this.

2.2. The fit with a general view of hyperbole

As well as being deeply unified with each other for the reason just given, the explanations in [Section 2.1](#) straightforwardly instantiate a stance, inspired by the work of others, to hyperbole in general, and explained further in [Barnden \(2020, 2022\)](#). I take any hyperbole, including ordinary ones such as “*Mike has millions of pets*,” to convey to the hearer that the actual value or intensity (here, Mike’s actual number of pets) may be lower than the overtly stated high point (here, millions), but is still at a “remarkably” high point. This works even when, for example, “tiny” is used to hyperbol-

ically convey “remarkably small.” This can be viewed as going down a scale of intensity of smallness, rather than up a scale of bigness.

Depending on context, “remarkably” can amount to a variety of things, including something like “significantly higher than expected” (see [Popa-Wyatt 2020](#), though see [Watling \(2020\)](#) for a countervailing view). Or, “remarkably” might amount to something like “frustratingly high,” as may be appropriate for “*This suitcase weighs a ton.*” (Here I follow [Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza 2017](#).) It is *not* implied that the remarkably-high value is high up on the relevant scale in some purely objective sense—rather, it is very much a matter of the value strongly striking the speaker as distinctly worth remarking on.

Nor is it the job of the hearer’s hyperbolic interpretation process itself to conjecture a particular point or interval on the scale. For instance, it is not this process’s job to go from “millions” in the example above down to some specific, fairly narrow range of numbers. *That* would be a matter of further, optional, inference involving the context and conjecturing what would be “remarkable” to the speaker. It would be nothing particularly to do with hyperbole. After all, the same sort of inference might be deployed for a *non*-hyperbolic sentence such as “*Mike has remarkably many pets.*”

We now make a necessary diversion before resuming on the topic of reflexivity and how it provides the special sort of hyperbole.

2.3. Preparatory metonymy and other preparatory transitions

Suppose that instead of (3) above (“*Teenagers’ passions are money for social media companies*”) we had

(3A) “*Teenagers are money for social media companies.*”

Despite the missing “*passions*”, this sentence can still be interpreted in the same way as before, *viz* as saying that teenagers’ passions *Lead to* the money. Or, it could be interpreted as saying that something else associated with teenagers, such as their activities, lead to the money, or indeed more loosely as saying that something or other associated with teenagers leads to the money. Under such analyses, there is a metonymic step from the teenagers to something associated with them, and this step is logically prior to the hyperbole. It is as if (3A) is first translated into something like (3), and only then is a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation formed.⁷

Such metonymic steps follow standard patterns, whereby for instance the agent(s) and other participants in an activity can stand for the activity. (See, e.g., [Littlemore 2015](#), which discusses the taxonomy of metonymic patterns proposed by [Radden & Kövecses 1999](#).) I call metonymic steps such as those just discussed for (3) steps of *preparatory metonymy* for the purposes of this article. We will meet other examples of preparatory metonymy later in the article.

Preparatory metonymies are one case of a more general class of preparatory transitions that might lead from the items ostensibly mentioned in a BE-clause to the items actually being put into relationship. Another case is metaphorical preparatory transitions. For instance, to anticipate an example in [Section 4](#), consider “*We are Mother Earth.*” One analysis would first take *Mother Earth* to be a metaphorical reference or our planet, so that the clause ostensibly equates us humans with the planet. Building on this, there could then be a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation for the sentence to the effect that we humans remarkably strongly *Contribute as Part to* our planet. However, preparatory metonymy is more salient for the examples in the present paper than preparatory metaphor is.

The issue of whether a hearer adopts a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation of a sentence, and, if so, the issue of which particular interpretation she constructs, are matters that are highly context-sensitive, including being sensitive to the particular biases, beliefs, etc. of the hearer. As a special case, the particular use, if any, that a hearer makes of preparatory transitions is context(/hearer)-sensitive. For instance, different hearers in a given discourse context might make different use of preparatory transitions and hence arrive at different reflexive-hyperbolic interpretations, even if the context is in other respects the same.

While preparatory transitions are an important topic in themselves, the present paper is focused more on how a sentence makes a reflexive-hyperbolic claim given that particular preparatory transitions have been effected, if any are. I regard the preparatory transitions as a separate matter from the reflexive hyperbole. It is just that some sentences involve a combination of two conceptually separate phenomena, reflexive hyperbole and preparatory transitions.

One complex, far-reaching matter not much addressed by this paper is the temporal ordering of the hearer’s processing. Despite the term “preparatory,” the cognitive processing involved in preparatory transitions may have a complex or non-obvious temporal relationship to the processing involved in (unconsciously) realizing that the sentence can be interpreted in a reflexive hyperbolic way and then interpreting it that way. Note that in example (3) the hearer might first

⁷ Notice carefully the “as if” in this sentence. I am *not* asserting that the hearer translates natural-language sentences into other natural-language sentences.

guess that the sentence is about something that *Leads to* money for the companies before working out exactly what that something is, and accordingly before taking the specific metonymic step from teenagers to that something.

2.4. Strict and broad reflexivity

The general pattern in the analyses of examples in Section 2.1 is that there is a contextually relevant relationship such that (I) *any* entity Y (of an appropriate type to take part in the relationship) bears the relationship to itself to a (II) *maximal* degree, under (III) *all* circumstances. Anything is *Like* itself (on any grounds) to the maximal degree, in all circumstances. Anything *Leads to* itself, to the maximal degree, under any circumstances. Anything in the public eye is maximally *Publicly Associated* with itself, under all circumstances. And so forth. I call a relationship that is like this *strictly reflexive* or just *reflexive*.⁸ This is what motivates the term “*reflexive hyperbole*” for hyperbole of the sort exemplified in Section 2.1.

However, such hyperbole can still arise when the relationship obeys a weaker condition. The weaker condition is merely as follows, and results from weakening (I), (II) and (III) above: for (I') *most* appropriate entities Y (not necessarily all entities), Y bears the relationship to itself to (II') an *extremely high* degree (not necessarily a maximal degree), under (III') *normal* circumstances (not necessarily all circumstances). When a relationship is like this, I say that it is *broadly reflexive*. Strict reflexivity is just a special, extreme case of broad reflexivity. Broad reflexivity is enough for us to be able to treat “X is Y” as if it were “X bears the relationship [in some contextually relevant way] to Y to an *extremely high* degree (because X just is Y)” and to take this as hyperbolic for “X bears the relationship to Y [in that way] to a *remarkably high* degree.”

This exploitation of (I', II', III') as opposed to (I, II, III) to get to a hyperbolic interpretation is no different from taking “*This meat is as soft as butter*” as hyperbolic for “*This meat is remarkably soft*.” It is enough that *most* butter is *extremely soft* under *normal* circumstances (e.g., the butter is not frozen). The use of butter in hyperbole about softness does not require that *all* types of butter be soft, for any butter to be *maximally soft* (even supposing there is a maximum of softness in the first place), or to be soft under *all* circumstances.

Barnden (2018) and Barnden (2022) include discussion of reflexive hyperbole based on various specific relationships that are merely broadly reflexive and not strictly reflexive. Two important cases, frequently arising in ordinary discourse, are *Mentally Identifying with*, as when someone mentally identifies with a famous real person or with a character in a work of fiction, and *Feeling Solidarity with*. These are broadly reflexive because people can typically be taken to mentally identify with themselves and to feel solidarity with themselves, but they are not strictly reflexive because there can be exceptions. (See Barnden (2018, 2022), for explanation.) Mental identification is “a complex and somewhat obscure notion” (as Barnden, 2022, says, drawing from discussion in Cohen 2001; Iguarta 2010), but arises in mundane examples like “*When Jack watches a Supergirl film, he turns into/ becomes Supergirl*,” where the dynamic BE-clause is interpreted as meaning that Jack goes into a state where he mentally identifies remarkably strongly with Supergirl. *Feeling Solidarity with* is also “a complex and variable matter” (Barnden, 2022) but arises in examples like the famous epithet “*I am Charlie*” taken reflexively-hyperbolically, after a preparatory metonymy, to mean that the speaker feels a remarkably high degree of solidarity with the murdered staff of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine. (This example is discussed in Barnden, 2018, 2022.).

We will occasionally see uses of *Mentally Identifying with* below, but this relationship and other broadly but non-strictly reflexive relationships will otherwise be put aside in this paper. The purpose of mentioning them is to emphasize that only broad, not strict, reflexivity is needed for reflexive hyperbole to be available as one interpretation route.

2.5. A further extension of the use of reflexive hyperbole

In discussing (1) (“*Armgarth was Orpheus*”) in Section 2.1 we did not account for one particular hyperbolic meaning mentioned there, namely that Armgarth *Acted* the character Orpheus remarkably convincingly. Now, acting a character is *not* itself even a broadly reflexive relationship, let alone strictly reflexive. It is not reasonable to say that, even typically, people act the role of *themselves* as if they were dramatic characters. So, how does the claimed hyperbolic meaning arise?

The answer is that *Acting* is what Barnden (2022) calls a “close” special case of the broadly reflexive (and in fact strictly reflexive) *Indicating* relationship. *Indicating* was discussed in 2.1 in relation to example (2) concerning Noel Coward *Indicating* England. When X *Acts* Y (well or badly), X inherently *Indicates* Y, at least while the acting is occurring, but possibly for longer. So, (1) can be taken in a reflexive-hyperbolic way about *Indicating*, i.e., to say that Armgarth *Indicated*

⁸ As I explain in Barnden (2018), this reflexivity is a standard notion in the mathematics of graded relationships.

Orpheus to a remarkably high degree. But, furthermore, we can take any contextually suitable notion of degree for the *Acting*, for example convincingness, to be the appropriate notion of degree for that particular case of *Indicating* as well. It is in this sense that *Acting* is a “close” special case of *Indicating*. Given this closeness as regards degrees, a hearer who takes (1) to be about *Acting* can understand that Armgart *Acted* Orpheus remarkably convincingly simply because he *Indicated* Orpheus remarkably convincingly.

2.6. Connections to metaphor and metonymy other than in preparatory transitions

When a BE-clause is given a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation about *Being-Like*, the interpretation can be regarded as metaphorical, if one wishes. But such interpretations are a special, strengthened sort of metaphorical interpretation. I argue (in Barnden, 2015, 2017, 2018) that metaphorical interpretations in general do *not* automatically involve remarkably high degrees of likeness, and that current theories of metaphorical interpretation do not imply that they do. For this reason, reflexive hyperbole concerning the *Being-Like* relationship, if construed as being, at the same time, a form of metaphor, is a distinct addition to current metaphor theory, rather than merely falling out of it as a special case.

A BE-clause could in context be ambiguous between a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation about *Being-Like* and an ordinary metaphorical reading. This is just one case amongst many where a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation is merely one member of a set of possible interpretations (some reflexive-hyperbolic, some not). It is plausible that a reason why speakers often intensify a *Likeness*-based BE-clause by stress on the copula (e.g., using “IS” rather than “is” in written cases), or by means of qualifiers such as “exactly” or “literally,” is to steer the hearer towards the *Likeness*-based reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation and away from a vanilla metaphorical interpretation. Also, note that there is no implication from what the present paper says that the hearer has to consider a normal metaphorical interpretation first, before committing to a reflexive-hyperbolic one. Depending on various contextual factors including his own particular beliefs and processing practices, he might go straight to a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation, without considering a normal metaphorical one at all, or might develop a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation in parallel with a normal metaphorical one. As indicated in Section 2.3, the present paper cannot go further into such detailed matters of processing.

To switch attention now to metonymy, one might wonder whether reflexive hyperbole about *Contributing as Part to*, and perhaps some other types of reflexive hyperbole, are actually just metonymy in some form (given especially that the part-of relationship supports a central, common type of metonymy). If they are, perhaps they are deliverable by current metonymy theory? I explore this question in depth in Barnden (2022), and give a No answer. Current metonymy theory does not of itself generally produce interpretations where the metonymic relationship in question, such as part-of, holds to a remarkably high degree, although it can do so in certain limited cases.

These issues about the relations between reflexive hyperbole and metaphor or metonymy are entirely separate from the issue of *preparatory* metaphor or metonymy. The latter issue concerns the choice of the items about which the sentence at hand is reflexive-hyperbolic, and is not about the nature of the reflexive hyperbole in itself: it is not about the issue of whether a given type of reflexive hyperbole relating those chosen items is itself metonymic or metaphorical in quality.

2.7. Other matters

First, despite the overall diversity of the (strictly or merely broadly) reflexive relationships discussed above, the reader may well have seen that some of them have similarities to each other, overlap each other, or have other strong links to each other. For example, apart from *Public Association* being a bidirectional form of *Indicating* as implied above, *X Indicating Y* can be viewed as the noticing of or thinking about *X Leading to* the noticing of or thinking about *Y*. *Acting* typically involves being temporarily appearing to be *Like* the character in some ways (e.g., in physical appearance and mannerisms), and might involve *Mentally Identifying with*. How exactly the space of relationships is divided up for the purposes of reflexive hyperbole is a matter of theoretical convenience and/or of (future) cognitive-psychological investigation.

Secondly, while the relationships discussed above have arisen prominently in examples I have encountered, there are others I have omitted for brevity, and there may be many that I have not yet considered at all. But I suggest that any broadly reflexive graded relationship can in principle supply reflexive hyperbole. (A detail here is that, as Barnden, 2022, explains, the BE-clause may need to include explicit hints about what exact relationship is intended, as in “*Hilary is Vyvyan, as far as hair is concerned.*”) And a relationship that is *not* broadly reflexive cannot supply reflexive hyperbole, except that, as illustrated in Section 2.5 for *Acting*, reflexive hyperbole is in a sense indirectly available for relationships that are “close” special cases of broadly reflexive ones.

Thirdly, examples (1) to (5) all ostensibly equate something with something else. But the phenomenon also arises with uses of “to be” etc. that categorize, rather than equate. This would be the case in “*The internet is a drug,*” which

can be taken to mean that the internet is remarkably like a drug (in general—not a specific one) in its addictiveness. However, my current approach here is to take them to be implicit equations—e.g., the internet is equated with some unspecified prototypical drug. (Cf. the example “*The internet is crack [cocaine]*,” discussed in Author, 2015, and abstracted from the headline “*The Internet Isn’t ‘Like’ Crack, It Is Crack*” in Sachon 2012.)

Finally, a BE-clause might have some conjunction of reflexive hyperbolic meanings, all at once. An especially rich example with possibly conjoint reflexive-hyperbolic meanings, discussed in Barnden (2022), is “*I am Amsterdam*,” which is prominently displayed and used on public signs, tourist mementoes, etc. in Amsterdam. We have already noted that (1) (“*Armgart was Orpheus*”) can reflexively-hyperbolically mean one of several things, such as that Armgart is remarkably *Like* Orpheus, Armgart and Orpheus and remarkably strongly *Publicly Associated* with each other, and that Armgart *Acts* Orpheus remarkably convincingly. But there is no reason why it shouldn’t simultaneously mean some combination of these different things. Similarly, “*Noel Coward is England*” might be taken by a hearer simultaneously to mean that: Noel Coward *Indicates* England (this was the meaning discussed above); Noel Coward makes a remarkably important *Contribution as Part* to the cultural scene in England; and Noel Coward’s plays *represent* a stratum of life in England, with (*theatrically*-)representing considered as a further close special case of *Indicating*.

3. SWITCHING ONE-WAY CASES AROUND

In discussing BE-clauses “*A is B*”, “*A becomes B*”, etc. we must distinguish between the expressions *A* and *B* themselves, on the one hand, and, on the other, the items they refer to, perhaps via preparatory transitions (Section 2.3). I will call these referred-to items—e.g., the opera-singer Armgart and the character Orpheus in (1)—the “*A* item” and “*B* item”. In particular, the present section will be concerned with how the *lexical* ordering of the *A* and *B* expressions in the sentence relates to the *relational* direction of the *A* and *B* items in a broadly-reflexive relationship underlying a given reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation. For instance, in (5) (“*Alex Salmond was the Scottish National Party*”) the lexical ordering is that the phrase “*Alex Salmond*” occurs before the copula and the phrase “*the Scottish National Party*” after it, while the relational direction is that the person Alex Salmond *Contributes* to the Scottish National Party as *Part* of it, not the other way round. Here the lexical ordering and the relational direction reflect each other but, as we will see, we cannot just assume this always happens.

In light of this, if we lexically reverse (5) to get “*The Scottish National Party was Alex Salmond*,” but keep the context as it was, we have questions such as: could this new sentence possibly mean that the Scottish National Party was now a part of Alex Salmond, i.e., the relational direction is reversed, or can it still mean what the original sentence meant (the relational direction is not reversed), or might we get a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation based on a different relationship, or are we pressed towards a reading that isn’t reflexive-hyperbolic at all? Such questions naturally arise also for sentences based on relationships other than *Contributes as Part to*.

Preparatory transitions introduce a significant complication. Recall that by the “*A* item” or “*B* item” I mean the item arrived at *through a preparatory transition if one is applied*. So, for instance, according to the analysis in Section 2.3 of (3A) (“*Teenagers are money for social media companies*”), the *A* item is the teenagers’ passions or activities (say), not the teenagers themselves. Unless otherwise noted, I will usually assume for simplicity that the preparatory transitions a hearer applies to the reversed clause are the same as those she applies to the original clause, but they might not be, even with unchanged context.

The main observations of this section will be that: (i) “*A is B*” and “*B is A*” can both be, but need not be, reflexively hyperbolic about the same relationship, such as *Being-Like*, *Contributing as Part to* or *Indicating*; (ii) when they are reflexively hyperbolic about the same relationship, the lexical reversal *may* or *may not* lead to a relational reversal, depending on the context, the nature of the *A* and *B* items, and the nature of the relationship, (iii) it is useful in considering the possibilities to distinguish between clearly directional relationships and ones that are in a certain sense only partially directional.

3.1. The case of clearly directional relationships

Consider again example (5), “*Alex Salmond was the Scottish National Party*,” and its reversed variant:

(5rev) *The Scottish National Party was Alex Salmond.*

If the context is unchanged, this clause can reasonably have the very same reflexive-hyperbolic, *Contributing as Part to* meaning as (5) does. If it does, then the lexical order reversal has not reversed the order of the parthood relationship, changed the type of contribution, or led to the adoption of some other relationship. The strength of the relationship in the hearer’s view may be unchanged as well, if she assigns a particular strength at all. But one of (5) or (5rev) may be more

natural than the other in context. For instance, if the discourse has already mentioned Alex Salmond, but the speaker feels she has not fully conveyed how important he was to the SNP, then (5) may be the more natural. Or, if the Scottish National Party has been under discussion but Alex Salmond not yet mentioned, then (5rev) may be the more natural.

To turn the point around, “A is B”, under a reflexive-hyperbolic *Contributing as Part to* interpretation, and for given A and B items, might *either* be about that A item as part of the B item *or* about that B item as part of the A item. The choice of relational direction is primarily urged by context and the nature of the items, not by the lexical ordering.

But different use of preparatory transitions could urge a different relational direction. For instance, the hearer might take (5rev) to say that the SNP contributed remarkably much to Alex Salmond’s life. Here there is a preparatory metonymic step from Alex Salmond to his life.

Barnden (2018) discusses the example “*Love is loaning your best comic magazines*” from the *Peanuts* cartoons by Charles M. Schulz (see, e.g., Popova 2012). Barnden (2018) analyses this as saying that such loaning would be a remarkably good *Indication* of love,⁹ and briefly mentions that the lexically reversed version, “*Loaning your best comic magazines is love*,” could mean just the same thing, instead of reversing the relational direction. The present article emphasizes that such non-reversal of relational direction is a general, principled phenomenon that can occur in many examples it is not just a matter of special examples.

But these comments do not imply that the lexical order cannot have any effect on the relational direction. Suppose, for instance, that some “A is B” clause is being considered as reflexive hyperbole based on *Leading to*. If the context and the nature of the A and B items do not strongly urge a particular relational direction, the lexical order could conceivably still exert a bias towards one direction. I conjecture that it biases in favour of the A item *Leading to* the B item, as the A item is in standard agentive position.

The relationships mentioned so far in examples in this section—*Contributing as Part to* and *Leading to*—are obviously directional, as is *Indicating*. The fact that something X *Leads to* or *Indicates* something else Y doesn’t entail that Y respectively *Leads to* or *Indicates* X in return. If one thing X *Contributes* to another thing Y as a *Part* of it, but isn’t the whole of it, then Y can’t even be a part of X (if we are considering ordinary parts and wholes in the world, not arcane mathematical objects).

Two remaining relationships in Section 2—*Being-Like* and *Being Integrated with*—have both a non-directional aspect and a potentially directional aspect, as follows. I will say for brevity that they are *partially directional*.

3.2. The case of partially directional relationships

I take *Being Integrated with* to be non-directional in that, if X is integrated with Y in a certain way to some extent, then Y is *ipso facto* integrated with X in that way to some extent. But I take it to be directional in that these extents can be different. In brief, X can be more integrated with Y than Y is with X. Notably, in the government/Mafia case in (4), the Ruritanian government might be proportionally much more affected than the Mafia is, if we take the Mafia to be a globally widespread phenomenon, so the government is much more integrated with the Mafia than the Mafia is with the government. This makes it more natural to say “*The Ruritanian government is integrated with the Mafia*” than to say “*The Mafia is integrated with the Ruritanian government*.”

But the reversed form could still be used, and would perhaps convey that the Mafia is much more comprehensively involved in the integration than the original sentence would have conveyed, if the lexical order reflects the relational direction that the speaker wishes to stress. (This connection between lexical order and stressed relational direction is a matter for future investigation).

On the other hand, the Mafia, considered as a world-side phenomenon, constitutes such a universal (i.e., standard and well-known) world context for the discourse, and is so huge compared to the Ruritanian government, that hearers may be likely to assume that the Mafia is not comprehensively integrated with the Ruritanian government, whichever lexical order is used in the sentence.

But note that it is still the case that the part of the Mafia that is present in Ruritania is potentially as strongly integrated with the government as the government is with the Mafia. It is just that this strength is lowered if the whole, global extent of the Mafia is considered. Relatedly, we can consider what would happen if the Ruritanian government were highly integrated with a criminal organization that is clearly confined to Ruritania. Suppose this organization is called the Rafia. Then the sentence “*The Rafia is the Ruritanian government*” might seem just as natural as “*The Ruritanian government is the Rafia*”, on the grounds that the Rafia as a whole is majorly affected. If so, the hearer may typically understand “*The Rafia is the Ruritanian government*” to convey a higher degree of integration of Rafia with Ruritanian government than “*The Ruritanian government is the Rafia*” does, rather than just saying the same thing in a less natural way. How the

⁹ NB: *Indication* is called *potential sign of* in Barnden (2018).

hearer's understanding is affected by lexical reversal is more finely dependent on peculiarities of the context in the Rafia case than it is in the Mafia case, because in the Rafia case the context is less universal in the above sense, and a Ruritania-specific criminal gang might or might not be large compared to the Ruritanian government.

Let us turn now to the *Being Like* relationship. If John and Sally have the same eye-colour it is natural to say that they are alike in that respect, without specifying a direction, i.e., without specifying that it is John who is like Mary or that it is Mary who is like John in that respect. However, it has been argued by others that likeness, or at least claims about likeness in ordinary discourse, cannot just be a matter of a directionless sharing of properties. For evidence for this point in the context of figurative language, see, e.g., Fogelin (2011: 60–66), who refers in particular to experimental evidence on similarity claims not being necessarily reversible. The matter rests partly on how salient the shared properties are for the two similar items. For instance (following the lines of an example in Fogelin, *loc. cit.*), if John and Sally both have blue eyes but these are highly salient in Sally's face but are not particularly salient in John's, then it can seem more acceptable to say that John is like Sally on the ground of eye colour than the reverse.

In the present paper I stay neutral as to whether (a) the degree of likeness of John to Sally as regards eye colour is different from the degree the other way round or (b) the degree is always the same but there can be reasons why a particular lexical order for *stating* a likeness in ordinary language is the preferred or even the only acceptable one. In either case, "*Sally is John*" and "*John is Sally*" may be given different reflexive-hyperbolic interpretations. These interpretations might involve the same grounds of likeness (e.g., eye colour) but different degrees of such likeness, or different grounds of likeness.

However, these comments do not necessarily prevent a hearer, especially one who already knows John and Sally's eye colours, taking "*Sally is John*" and "*John is Sally*" to claim exactly the same thing, e.g. that John and Sally are remarkably alike in eye colour, with no difference in the degrees of likeness.

In sum, the logic of reflexive hyperbole itself allows a remarkable *Integration* or *Likeness* between an A item to a B item to be stated either by "*A is B*" or by "*B is A*"—because, after all, a literal equation of two items means the same thing both ways round—but how a hearer actually takes the statement as reflexive hyperbole (if she does at all) depends on the general types of the items, the specific facts about the items, her own prior beliefs, and other aspects of context.

3.3. Change of Relationship, etc.

In a given context, a given hearer might tend to take "*A is B*" and "*B is A*" for given expressions *A* and *B* to be reflexive-hyperbolic about different relationships (perhaps also involving different items, depending on what preparatory transitions the hearer applies), or even to take one to be reflexive-hyperbolic but not the other. For instance, continuing with the "*Armgart was Orpheus*" example as meaning that Armgart *Acted* the part of Orpheus remarkably convincingly, the lexically reversed form "*Orpheus was Armgart*" would plausibly be interpreted as being reflexive hyperbole about something other than *Acting*, say *Being-Like*. Alternatively, "*Orpheus was Armgart*" might be taken as an ordinary, non-reflexive-hyperbolic, metaphorical statement reflecting a less remarkable likeness of Orpheus to Armgart.

4. TWO-WAY CASES OF REFLEXIVE HYPERBOLE

Sometimes, one finds utterances of the basic form "*A is B [and] B is A*" where reflexive hyperbole is a good candidate for interpreting both of the BE-clauses. Some examples:-

(6) *For many, he was the party and the party was him.* [Heard on Sky News television programme, 30 May 2018. "He" = Alex Salmond, one-time leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP).]

(7) *Orpheus was Armgart, Armgart Orpheus.* [In a description, in a play by George Eliot, of opera-singer Armgart's performance as Orpheus, (Jenkins 1989: 121). I assume there is an elided "was" between the last two words.]

(8) *You have bound my heart with subtle chains / So much pleasure that it feels like pain / So entwined now that we can't shake free / I am you and you are me[.]* [From a song titled "*I am You*" sung by Depeche Mode (Genius.com 2022).]

(9) *We are you, you are us, and we are one.* [Heard by the author during the *Morning Service* on BBC Radio 4 on 7 November 2021, as part of a humanist prayer to Mother Earth, at the time of the COP-26 conference on climate change.]

(10) *The Prime Minister is Chequers and Chequers is the Prime Minister[.]* [Heard on the *Newsnight* programme, BBC 2 television channel, 2 October 2018. Both occurrences of "Chequers" are metonymic references to the so-called Chequers plan for Brexit, devised during a UK government meeting at the house called Chequers.]

(11) *I am England and England is me.* [Said by the English playwright Noel Coward (Hoare 2004), and mentioned briefly in Barnden (2022)]

I call such examples “two-way” cases. Each BE-clause is a lexical reversal of the other. I will also say there is a “reversed repetition” of the first BE-clause. The aims of this section are: (i) to map out, in a provisional way, the overall space of possible different reflexive-hyperbolic interpretations that two-way cases in general might in principle be given, and (ii) to discuss what reflexive-hyperbolic meanings might be plausible for the specific examples above. The discussion takes the considerations in [Section 3](#) as a basis.

4.1. The overall space of possibilities

For brevity, I will confine attention to situations where a hearer interprets both BE-clauses in a two-way case in reflexive hyperbolic ways. Given this restriction, it is convenient to divide the space of possibilities up into categories C1 to C4 below.

But first, a major potential complication is that the pair of items addressed by the first BE-clause may not be the same as the pair addressed by the second BE-clause. For instance, in interpreting the two BE-clauses the hearer may make different use of preparatory transitions, so that there could be three or four different items across the two clauses, instead of just two items. To simplify our discussion, in describing categories C1 to C3 I restrict both clauses to be about the same two items, releasing the restriction only in the last category, C4.

(C1—*Effectively Identical Repetition of Meaning*) Both BE-clauses are interpreted as saying *the same thing*: that the two items are related by the same relationship, in the same direction, to the same extent, and in the same way, e.g., same likeness grounds, or same type of contribution of a part, or same way of mentally identifying. For example, the sentence is (7) “*Orpheus was Armgart [and] Armgart [was] Orpheus*”, with both BE-clauses being taken to say that Armgart acts the Orpheus character remarkably convincingly, and with neither clause conveying more convincence than the other.

(C2—*Variation of Relationship Specifics*) Both BE-clauses involve, broadly speaking, the same relationship (e.g., *Being-Like*, *Contributing as Part to* or *Mentally Identifying with*) between the two items, but the specific way this relationship holds is qualitatively different between the two clauses: e.g., the *Being-Like* grounds are different, or the type of *Contribution* the *Part* makes is different, or there is a different way of *Mentally Identifying*, etc. The overall effect is to convey both ways.

(C3—*Relational Reversal*) Both BE-clauses involve, loosely speaking at least, the same relationship (e.g., *Being-Like*, *Contributing as Part to* or *Mentally Identifying with*), but the relationship goes in opposite directions, so the overall effect is to convey both directions. For example, “*Bill is Mary and Mary is Bill*” might, in the first BE-clause, be about Bill mentally identifying with Mary, and, in the second BE-clause, be about Mary mentally identifying with Bill. The category includes the cases where the relationship is only partially directional ([Section 3.2](#)) and the lexical reversal leads to “partial relational reversal”, i.e., change of degree in the relational direction emphasized.

(C4—*Other Possibilities*) The remaining cases, of many different types, including ones where the two BE-clauses are not taken to be about the same two items, and/or are taken to be about widely differing relationships.

C2 and C3 allow for overlap, in that a given case may involve both variation of relationship specifics and relational reversal. C1, C2 and C3 as stated are over-simplified in that they do not account for the hearer taking a BE-clause to be about more than one relationship—recall the comments about multiple simultaneous meanings for “*Armgart was Orpheus*” at the end of [Section 2](#). I confine this multiple-meaning possibility to C4, except for the fact that, in C1 to C3, one relationship may naturally involve another, as for instance when the dramatic *Acting* relationship naturally involves *Being-Like*. In the descriptions of C1 to C3, the allusions to “the” relationship are implicitly to the main one, such as *Acting*, usually leaving such subsidiary relationships unaddressed for simplicity.

C1 is labelled as *Effectively Identical Repetition* because the idea is that the hearer takes the sentence almost entirely as if it had been just an identical repetition, as in “*Orpheus was Armgart. Orpheus was Armgart.*” It is not uncommon for people, when speaking rather than writing, to repeat identically what they have just said. Often, they presumably do this for a pragmatic effect such as affective emphasis, e.g., emphasis of their wonder at the situation reported. I conjecture that such pragmatic effects can carry over to two-way cases, but that such cases may involve additional pragmatic effects. For instance, if an identical repetition in our Orpheus/Armgart example were to increase the level of wonder or insistence on the speaker’s part, as compared with merely saying “*Orpheus was Armgart*”, then so does the reversed repetition if interpreted in a C1 way; but the reversed repetition may, in addition, be more stylistically acceptable to, interesting to, or noticeable to the hearer than the identical repetition would have been.

Special pragmatic effects may also arise in C2 to C4. Pragmatic effects in language in general are extensively surveyed and discussed in [Colston \(2015\)](#), and many could be relevant to examples in this section, though the section will only mention a small number of possibilities in passing.

4.2. The specific examples

Here I discuss various interesting possibilities for the meanings of (6–11), assuming that both BE-clauses of each example are taken in a reflexive hyperbolic way.

4.2.1. Salmond and the Scottish National party

Both BE-clauses of (6) (“*For many, he [Salmond] was the party and the party was him*”) might be taken to be saying that Salmond made a remarkably strong *Contribution* to the party as a *Part* (member) of it. Then, we have a case of C1 or C2.

I include C1 even though we have the “*For many, . . .*” wrapping in (6). Within that wrapping the speaker is repeating wording that couches a thought attributed to others, rather than repeating her own whole utterance. Thus the syntactic similarity to the usual phenomenon of identical repetition of a whole utterance is weakened. But if the hearer does take the C1 route then, following [Section 4.1](#), the effect of the reversed repetition, as compared to just saying “*For many, Salmond is the party,*” is merely to have an effect such as strengthening an emotional overtone. This overtone could for instance, be wonder on the speaker’s part or approbation on the part of the “many.” In addition, (6) may sound more interesting or acceptable than it would have done with identical repetition within the wrapping (“*For many, Salmond is the party, Salmond is the party*”).

Alternatively, the hearer could take the C2-but-not-C3 route. The difference of meaning between the two BE-clauses could conceivably be that the hearer considers different types of *Contribution* made by Salmond as a *Part* of the party. However, I put this aside here in favour of the following possibilities.

So far, we have supposed that the hearer takes “*he*” and “*the party*” in (6) to refer to Salmond himself and the SNP itself. The SNP cannot be a part of Salmond, so there cannot be a C3-style interpretation (*Relational Reversal*) based on *Contributing as Part to*. But another route to meaning would be for the hearer to apply a preparatory metonymy in each case, leading, say, to Salmond’s principles and the SNP’s principles respectively. Then a *Contributing as Part to* relationship could hold in either direction, with the type of contribution merely being quantitative, concerning the proportion of the one set of principles is formed by the members of the other set. Thus, there is a C3-style interpretation, to the effect that both sets of principles form a remarkably high contribution to the other. In the extreme this would mean that they are the same set. However, it is reasonable to allow some of Salmond’s principles not to be within the SNP’s and vice versa, so the overall effect is that the two sets of principles are remarkably similar but there is a remainder on each side.

A variant possibility, with much the same resultant meaning, uses the same preparatory metonymies, but rests on *Being Integrated with*. Such an interpretation could lie in C3, with the point of the reversed repetition being to emphasize that, as regards their principles, Salmond and the SNP are roughly equally affected by the *Being Integrated with*. (Recall the comments about partial directionality of *Being Integrated with* in [Section 3.2](#).)

As for C4, one possibility is to take the first BE-clause to say that Salmond is *Publicly Associated with* the SNP remarkably strongly, but the second BE-clause to say, as above, that Salmond makes a remarkably strong *Contribution* to the party as *Part of* it. Such an interpretation of (6) may not be a likely one, but is a theoretically salutary one to consider.

4.2.2. Armgart and Orpheus

Plausibly, both BE-clauses of (7) (“*Orpheus was Armgart, Armgart [was] Orpheus*”) are about how remarkably well Armgart was acting Orpheus. The surrounding context of the example, which is from a discussion in Eliot’s drama of how well Armgart played the part, gives no indication that some other relationship might be intended. So, my main overall suggestion is that the hearer applies a C1, C2 or C3 interpretation about *Acting*.

But, first, it is salutary to consider other relationships between an actor A and a fictional character B, going beyond relationships that might be part and parcel of acting. Drawing from the relationships covered in [Section 2](#), just two of the possibilities are: that A might be *Like* B in ways other than those contributing to his performance; and that A might have *Led to* B (e.g., perhaps it was A who wrote the fiction and invented B). For the purposes of (7), though, there is no contextual reason to suppose that these relationships held to any significant extent, let alone a remarkable extent, or, that, even if they happened to hold, the discourse is about them.

So, reverting to the *Acting* relationship and considering first a C1-style interpretation (*Effectively Identical Repetition of Meaning*), it may be that (7) says the same thing twice, but with a pragmatic effect such as emphasizing the speaker’s enthusiasm.

But C2 (*Variation of Relationship Specifics*) together with C3 (*Relational Reversal*) is also viable, if we take into account that *Acting* can involve additional relationships such as *Being-Like*. One possibility is that the two BE-clauses make the hearer think of different grounds for *Being-Like* between Armgart and Orpheus, as well as both

clauses conveying that Armgart acted Orpheus remarkably well. “*Armgart was Orpheus*” may bias a hearer towards thinking of Armgart (at least when on stage) as having looked like whatever image of Orpheus the hearer may already have in his mind, or like whatever appearance Orpheus is normally given in artworks. But, conversely, saying that “*Orpheus was Armgart*” may bias a hearer towards thinking of Orpheus as looking like Armgart did when on stage. Overall, the hearer gets a more complete impression of how alike Armgart and Orpheus were, drawing more symmetrically on prior conceptions of each of them. This in turn could add to the overall impression given that Armgart was a remarkably appropriate vehicle for a dramatic representation of Orpheus.

4.2.3. Singing: *I am you*

A first, rather cynical impression might be that the reversed repetition in the last line of (8) (“*I am you and you are me*”) was included merely for superficial reasons—to fill out the line metrically and to provide a rhyme with the word “free” at the end of the previous line. As weak evidence for this, the title of the song is just “*I am You*,” and not “*I am You and You are Me*.”

But, working against that possibility, there is an interesting progression from asymmetry at the start of the first line in (8), “*You have bound my heart with subtle chains*,” to greater symmetry in the third line, “*So entwined now that we can't shake free*.” In the first line, the singer's heart (or more precisely, the heart of the fictional persona presented by the singer) has been somehow bound, presumably to the other person, limiting the singer's freedom of action. But there's no suggestion that the other person's freedom is significantly limited. On the other hand, the third line depicts a symmetrical entwining. Recalling from Section 2.1 that *Being Integrated with* can be a matter of entwining, it is natural to take both lexical equations in the last line in (8) as reflexive hyperboles about *Being Integrated with*.

Then, the reversed repetition in the last line may serve to emphasize that we have a particularly symmetrical sort of integration. It is unlike the asymmetrical integration in example (4), where the Ruritanian government is much more affected than the (global) Mafia is. Building on comments in Section 3, the reversed repetition arguably has the effect of conveying that the singer and the person have changed to roughly similar extents as a result of their relationship, whereas just saying “*I am you*” in the last line of (8) would have conveyed that the singer was the main locus of change. If this analysis is correct, we have a C3 style of interpretation.

We can also put it as follows. There is a suggestion of progression of the love relationship from first to last line. According to the first line, the singer *became* enchained by the other person at some point. On the basis of this line, it would have been appropriate to say “*I became you*” but not “*You became me*.” But the symmetry of entwining implied by the third line, where that symmetry dynamically arises at some point as conveyed by the “*now*”, means that “*You became me*” would then have become appropriate as well. While a becoming is never explicitly stated, the two directions of it that are implicit in the lines could motivate the use of both “*I am you*” and “*you are me*” as natural endpoints of the two processes of becoming.

As for C2, there is no suggestion of there being two different sorts of *Integration* in the two directions, and indeed the song seems to point towards the entwining being of the same qualitative sort for both partners. So C2 seems to be out of play.

4.2.4. Mother Earth

The first and second BE-clauses of (9) (“*We are you, you are us, and we are one*,” with “*you*” referring to Mother Earth) can both, again, be reflexive hyperbole about *Being Integrated with*, this time of us humans with Mother Earth / our planet. I also argue that the third clause (“*we are one*”) can also be given such an interpretation.

There is complication here that I will mostly put aside in this paper, concerning the ordering of (i) the use of metaphor inherent in “*Mother Earth*” as a reference to our planet and (ii) a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation act. A hearer might first take the integration to be between humans and fictional person, Mother Earth, and only then apply metaphor-based transformations to translate this integration into an integration of humans with the planet. Or, he might first interpret “*Mother Earth*” to refer to the planet and then take the integration to be between us and the planet. In this case, he applies a metaphoric preparatory transition (see Section 2.3) to provide a basis for the consequently available reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation act. Both orderings are exploited as appropriate (without further comment) in the discussion below.¹⁰

¹⁰ The orderings as described may only be approximations to the actual ordering of processing effected by a hearer. The processing involved in the preparatory transition may be somewhat mixed or interleaved with the other processing involved in developing a reflexive-hyperbolic interpretation. For instance, *Integration* may already be salient in the discourse, and the hearer may therefore guess that (9) should be taken to be reflexive hyperbolic about *Integration* before working out exactly what items are integrated, and in particular before taking a metaphorical step from Mother Earth to our planet. As was noted in section 2.3, this paper does not go much into temporal, processing issues.

Aside from *Integration*, another possibility for the relationship involved in the first and second BE-clauses in (9) is *Contributing as Part to*. In this case it makes most sense to adopt the second mutual ordering of metaphor and reflexive hyperbole in the previous paragraph, i.e., take us humans to be a part of the planet rather than of the fictional person Mother Earth.

Either possibility for the relationship (*Integration* or *Contributing as Part to*) is further supported by the third clause, “*we are one*,” assuming that the “*we*” here means we humans together with Mother Earth or the planet, as opposed to the “*we*” in the first BE-clause, which presumably just means we humans. The third clause, while itself a BE-clause, ostensibly states an equation between us humans and Mother Earth / the planet rather than equation between us humans and something called “*one*.” Instead, the “*are one*” serves ostensibly to say that humans and Mother Earth / the planet are the same one thing.

Given the context of fighting climate change, *Being Integrated with* and *Contributing as Part to* are likely relationships for interpreting the example, but other relationships could in principle be relevant. Indeed, drawing again from the relationships in Section 2, the example could realistically mean that the planet has *Led to* us or that we *Mentally Identify* with fictional person Mother Earth.

Indeed, realistically, (9) may have multiple dimensions of reflexive-hyperbolic meaning operating in concert. The interpretation would then be in category C4. But on the simplifying assumption that either *Contributing as Part to* or *Being Integrated with* is the only relationship involved, we can consider C1, C2 or C3. I confine attention to *Being Integrated with* as the more interesting possibility. In fact, all three clauses of (9) can be taken as reflexive hyperbole about *Being Integrated with*, given the above analysis of the third clause as an ostensible equation.

Taking the first two clauses alone, the main possibility is a C3-but-not-C2 interpretation. I conjecture that, much as in Section 4.2.3 concerning the song *I am You*, the reversed repetition serves the purpose of conveying the rough equality of extent with which we and Mother Earth / the planet are involved in the integration. This claim is more difficult than it was for the song, because we are surely more involved in the integration than our planet is. There is much more to the planet than human beings, and our planet will continue to exist in some form whatever happens to humans. Mother Earth may be less human than we like to think! But, nevertheless, (9) arguably presses the hearer towards an understanding that is *more* symmetric than merely “*We are you*” would.

Given that analysis, the lexically directionless third clause in (9), interpreted as conveying a remarkably high degree of integration, rams this symmetry home. Overall, the reversed repetition provided by the second clause and the intrinsically symmetric restatement by the third clause convey the extent to which the planet as a whole is involved in our activities—governing them and being affected by them.

4.2.5. The Prime Minister and Chequers

Example (10) moves us from the sublime level of (9) to the wholly different level of Brexit—the recent exit of Britain from the European Union. (10) was said by a BBC *Newsnight* anchor, Emily Maitlis, while interviewing a political commentator, and alluded to how people who were against the “*Chequers*” plan for Brexit might have felt about the then Prime Minister of the UK, Theresa May. The immediately surrounding discourse context did not give strong clues about what Maitlis meant exactly, so the following comments are about what she could realistically have meant in my view.

Theresa May, as the originator or at least the chief originator of the plan, *Led to* it. She was also *Publicly Associated with* the plan. It might also be said that the plan was part of her (it was part of her thinking), and so made a *Contribution to her as Part of* her thinking. All three relationships seem relevant to negative feelings a plan opponent might have had about May. So it is certainly possible that the BE-clauses are about different relationships. However, I will discuss just one possibility, where both clauses are based on *Public Association*.

I assume here that *Public Association* is partially non-directional and partially directional in the sense of Section 3.2, in that when two things X and Y are publicly associated, a thought of one of X, Y might *more* easily be prompted by a thought of the other one than the other way round, even though both ways round are easy. For instance, thinking about the Chequers plan might be assumed to have more easily led to thinking about Theresa May than vice versa, given the great variety of things a Prime Minister is engaged in and might be publicly associated with. Under this assumption, the Chequers plan is the more active of the two items as regards prompting a use of the association. Thus, saying “*Chequers is the Prime Minister*” would fit more closely with the assumed nature of the public association than the reversal does, as it puts the plan in the syntactic position that is normally more agentive. So, adding the lexical reversal, “*The Prime Minister is Chequers*” serves to emphasize that the association is more equally bidirectional than normal. The interpretation of the whole sentence then involves a sort of partial reversal of the relationship and is thus in category C3 (but probably not C2).

4.2.6. England and Noel Coward

There are many possibilities as to which relationship(s) are in play in the first clause, “*I am England*”, in (11), and similarly with its second clause, “*England is me*.” One possibility is that the hearer takes both BE-clauses to convey that Noel Coward’s plays represent remarkably well the behaviour of [a certain sector of] people in England at the time the plays were written. I take representation to be a close special case of *Indicating*, and thus indirectly able to provide reflexive hyperbole. However, the two BE-clauses can have subtly different effects. The first clause may focus the hearer’s mind on what he already thinks English people’s behaviour was like, so that he takes such behaviour to be claimed to be remarkably well represented by the plays, possibly thereby expanding his impression of the plays, whereas the second BE-clause may focus the hearer’s mind on the nature of the behaviour that he already takes the plays to exhibit, and he now takes this behaviour to represent the behaviour of English people remarkably well, possibly expanding his impression of the nature of English people at large. We therefore have a C2 interpretation. But it is not C3 because the direction of representation is the same in both clauses.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has expanded the exploration of reflexive hyperbole, a special, important and commonly occurring type of hyperbole that has otherwise received little explicit attention. Reflexive hyperbole in all its various forms is unified by being based on essentially simple features of broadly-reflexive relationships and of hyperbole in general. Broadly-reflexive relationships are very special, in that most relationships in the world have no reflexivity at all (an item does not bear the relationship to itself at all). But they nevertheless form an indefinitely large class of relationships. This article has focused for brevity on a particular set of broadly reflexive relationships in [Section 2](#). These were in fact all strictly reflexive and were *Being Like*, *Indicating*, *Leading to*, *Being Integrated with* and *Contributing as Part to*. (Here I am counting them coarsely, putting aside the point that, for instance, *Being Like* can be on different grounds on different occasions—if we count finely, by considering such differences, then there can be no finite list of relationships.) However, a few other distinctly different broadly reflexive relationships were studied in previous publications, and many important ones no doubt remain to be investigated.

The phenomenon of reflexive hyperbole has interesting potential manifestations in two-way cases such as those in [Section 4](#). The possible effects of saying not just “*I am England*”, for example, but also its reversed form “*England is me*” range from pragmatic effects such as emphasis of speaker emotion, through meaning effects such as conveying that a single relationship applies in both directions between the items mentioned and/or making it clear that it applies in two different ways, to conveying that two quite different relationships apply between the two items. Additionally, the two clauses need not even refer to the same pair of items, according to a particular hearer, because the hearer may make different use of preparatory meaning transitions such as preparatory metonymies.

The observations about two-way cases arose partly from consideration of what would happen if a one-way case were replaced by its lexical reversal, especially if the context and preparatory transitions were left unchanged. But two-way cases introduce additional factors, as when near-repetition adds pragmatic force. More subtly, in cases where context would allow a relationship to hold both ways round between two items, so that the hearer might not be able clearly to see which way round was intended or whether both ways were intended, the reversed repetition can have the effect of ensuring that both directions are conveyed.

The observations made about replacing one-way cases by their reversals and about two-way cases are purely theoretical, and even then are just presented as a first step in a possible programme of study. The area is ripe for empirical and additional theoretical exploration. There are also many facets of reflexive hyperbole not much addressed by this article, such as ways that it can be conveyed other than by the means illustrated in [Section 2.1](#) (note the “*we are one*” in [Section 4.2.4](#), and the analysis of “*literally*” mentioned in [Section 2.1](#) and presented in [Barnden, 2017](#)), and negated uses of reflexive hyperbole, as in “*The diaries wouldn’t become my whole life, . . . but they must inevitably take an important part in it*” ([Vine 1994](#): 340).

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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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