

Annotation task: 'Tis but a figure of speech

The goal of this project is to identify and categorize instances of **understatement** within a dataset of texts.

Understatement is a figure of speech in which a situation or sentiment is unexpectedly expressed in a way that makes it seem less important or less severe than it actually is.

Your accurate annotations will contribute to the development and evaluation of advanced tools that can automatically detect understatements in narrative texts, supporting various applications in natural language processing, including text mining, content moderation, sentiment analysis, and beyond.

For this annotation task, you'll see paragraphs of text, with one phrase emphasized in bold. For every emphasized phrase:

1. Determine whether or not it contains an understatement.
2. Report how confident you are in your assessment (on a scale from 1 to 3).
3. If you think it does contain an understatement, select which type of understatement it is.
4. If you think it does contain an understatement, select which function the understatement has.

About understatements

An understatement is a figure of speech in which the **weight** of a statement is purposely lowered. It often results in irony where, for instance, the speaker's response to an event does not match how the viewer expects the speaker to react.

When identifying an understatement, try to assess the weight of the **literal** expression and the weight you think the speaker **implied**. If the weight of the literal expression is **lower** than that of what you think is implied, the expression is an understatement.

To estimate the implied weight, you often need context and world knowledge. For example, when a speaker says "That'll take a minute or two", it's impossible to know whether the phrase is an understatement without context; imagine the following scenario's:

1. The speaker was asked how long they would take to brush their teeth.

2. The speaker was asked how long they would take to build a house.

In the first scenario, the expression matches the expectation of how long it takes to brush one's teeth. The speaker's utterance "That'll take a minute or two" in this context, is thus not likely an understatement.

In the second scenario, the expression doesn't match the expectation of how long it takes to build a house. The weight of the literal expression "a minute or two", is 'lower' than that of the expectation of months or years. For this reason, the utterance in this scenario is likely to be an understatement.

Note how both assessments require the **context** of knowing what task the speaker is referring to, and the **world knowledge** of knowing how long it typically takes to brush one's teeth, or build a house.

For this reason, we include a paragraph context for every example in the survey.

Functions of understatements

Understatements are figures of speech and serve a **pragmatic function**.

That which a speaker expresses in an understatement can also be expressed without an understatement, for example when a speaker says "The film wasn't bad", they could also say "the film was okay/good". A speaker thus 'chooses' to replace the regular expression with the figure of speech, to create some form of **emphasis**.

Such emphasis can serve several pragmatic functions:

1. **Mocking**: brings negative attention to something or someone.
2. **Humoristic**: used for comedic effect
3. **Tempering**: moderates the statement

In the survey, we'll ask you to identify the pragmatic function of understatements. Because these functions **aren't mutually exclusive**, we let you select multiple functions per understatement.

Types of understatements

There are two types of understatements: **meiosis** and **litotes**.

A **meiosis** is an understatement where the speaker substitutes an expression with a weaker expression, for example:

- "There's been a slight problem." (The problem is disastrous.)
- "I'm feeling a bit under the weather." (Speaker has the bubonic plague.)
- "I may have made a little mistake." (Speaker is calling from jail.)

A **litotes** is an understatement that makes use of a negation of the opposite, for example:

- “The food wasn’t bad.” (Speaker thought the food was delicious.)
- “It’s not looking great” (Speaker inspects a car after a crash.)
- “Not too shabby” (Speaker walks into a 5-star hotel room.)
- After-sales service is not very efficient. No feedback. Long waiting time.
(Full Trustpilot review)

In the annotation task, for every understatement you identify, you’ll be asked to report which type you think the understatement belongs to. To help you remember which is which, we’ll use the following labels:

- “Meiosis (a weaker expression)”
- “Litotes (a negation of the opposite)”

Practicalities

- The task consists of selecting options from cells that have drop-down menus in a spreadsheet.
- The annotation task will take roughly 30 to 75 minutes.
- Once you have annotated a phrase and moved on to the next phrase, **do not** change your previous annotation(s).