

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TERMS *UNDERSTATEMENT* AND *MEIOSIS* IN ACADEMIC LITERATURE

Richard Gramanich Štromajer

Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Mateja Bela, Banská Bystrica
richard.stromajer@umb.sk

Abstract

The paper offers a comparative analysis of the terms *understatement* and *meiosis*, highlighting their conceptual similarities and unique treatment in academic literature. Both involve a decrease in propositional meaning; however, their interpretation differs among various theoretical frameworks. *Understatement* is commonly regarded as a pragmatic phenomenon reliant on context, while *meiosis* is typically characterised as a more emphatic and rhetorically significant form of minimisation. By incorporating various definitions, cultural viewpoints, and current scholarly analyses, the article uncovers the ambiguous terminology surrounding these concepts. It suggests that a more accurate distinction, based on the extent of minimisation, rhetorical purpose, and contextual usage, is essential for a better understanding of their functions within the classification of rhetorical, stylistic, and literary devices.

Key words: understatement, meiosis, meaning, figures of speech, comparative analyses

Introduction

In academic discussions about rhetorical, stylistic, and literary devices, the terms *understatement* and *meiosis* are frequently employed in ways that make it difficult to distinguish between them, and their usage differs based on the theoretical framework employed. The academic discourse includes viewpoints asserting that while *understatement* and *meiosis* are related, *understatement* involves a gentler softening of a statement, whereas *meiosis* involves a more deliberate and significant downplaying (cf. Ibáñez, 2011, p. 114; Carston and Wearing, 2015, p. 79; Abrams, 1999, p. 120). A different perspective interprets *meiosis* solely as the Greek term for *understatement* (cf. Abrams, 1999, p. 120; Christensen, 2020, p. 24).

Understatement itself has been explained in several ways: (a.) as a communication strategy where someone says less while they mean more (cf. Claridge, 2011, p. 11; Israel, 2006, p. 143); (b.) as an expression of societal expectations of modesty and self-control (cf. Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 28; Hübler, 1983, p. 5); and last but not least (c.) as a cognitive tool that involves scaling back intensity of the meaning (cf. Israel, 2006, p. 144). *Meiosis*, by contrast, is often associated with (a.) irony (cf. Nouwen, 2024, pp. 704-711; Dynel, 2016, pp. 9-10), (b.)

humour or euphemism (cf. Mohammed and Dawood, 2023, p. 860; Dumitrescu, 2012, p. 167), and sometimes even with (c.) subtle insults or criticism (cf. Greene et al., 2012, p. 860). If we take into consideration examples such as “*I’m a bit disappointed*” (Dumitrescu, 2012, p. 167) and “*It’s just a scratch*” (Ibáñez, 2011, p. 113) we can see how interpretations can shift depending on the theoretical angle one takes. While both *understatement* and *meiosis* can be understood as forms of minimising meaning, and both most likely operate on distinct levels of intensity reduction. For instance, the phrase “*I’m a bit disappointed*” (Dumitrescu, 2012, p. 167) may, within a particular context, convey a sense of genuine disappointment. In contrast, the statement “*It’s just a scratch*” (Ibáñez, 2011, p. 113), when referring to a visibly serious wound, exemplifies a more extreme form of *understatement*, where minimisation of meaning is far more pronounced.

The absence of a clear agreement on these concepts probably indicates not just vague language but also more fundamental variations in the methods scholars use for rhetorical, stylistic, and literary analysis. It should be emphasised that the reduction of meaning in these instances depends greatly on context, making it most effectively analysed from a pragmatic perspective. As will be further discussed in the analysis, these terms can be understood in various ways: (a.) some scholars may treat them as synonymous; (b.) others as closely related but differing in the degree to which they reduce meaning; and still others may view *understatement* as (c.) a broader category encompassing subordinate terms like *meiosis* and *litotes* which share a functional connection to *understatement*.

The Roots of *Understatement* and *Meiosis*

The following analysis begins by looking at the definitions and etymologies of both terms as outlined in the Online Etymological Dictionary (Etymonline) and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which provide valuable insights into their historical roots. This foundational work will be built upon with additional relevant sources to enhance our understanding of the terms’ development and interpretations. Based on Etymonline, the noun *understatement* first appears in 1799, referring to the “*act of understating; that which is understated*” (Harper, n.d.). The verb *to understate* predates the noun slightly, emerging in 1781 with the meaning to “*represent[s] less strongly than the truth will admit*” (Harper, n.d.). From this verb comes the adjective *understated*, which develops by 1937 to describe a style that is deliberately restrained or subtle, often used in reference to fashion, writing, or design where simplicity is valued over showiness (Harper, n.d.).

OED explores this idea from a more complex point of view by stating that “*the earliest known use of the noun understatement is in the late 1700s*” while the “*earliest evidence for understatement is from 1799, in Monthly Review*” (OED, n.d.). According to information from the archive, *The Monthly Review* was a prominent British periodical published in London during the 18th and 19th centuries, noted for its critical engagement with literature, science, and philosophy (The Online Books Page, n.d.). The anonymous review of François Noël’s *Tableau Historique et Politique* criticises the author’s strategic distortion of national data, particularly his tendency to minimise France’s population and productivity. By “*stating*

at the lowest its own populousness and produce, and in favouring a similar understatement by its neighbours” (ART. VIII. Tableau Historique et Politique, 1799, p. 528). In the article, Noël downplays France’s position in a way that seems modest but is truly misleading. This should not be understood as an *understatement* in a contemporary sense; it is rather a strategic distortion that invites similar treatment of other nations to support a political agenda. Nowadays, OED defines *understatement* as “a statement which falls below the truth or fact” (OED, n.d.).

The OED traces the earliest evidence of the verb *to understate* “from 1824, in the writing of James Mackintosh, political writer and politician” (OED, n.d.). Hübler (1983, p. 5) specifies that this usage appears in Mackintosh’s article *Dissertation on the Progress of Ethical Philosophy, Chiefly During the 17th and 18th Centuries*. Mackintosh (1851, p. 745) in the revised version of the original article wrote that he has “seen the widow of this unhappy sufferer, - a pious and amiable woman, worthy to be the helpmate of her martyred husband, distinguished by a calm and clear understanding, and, as far as [he] could discover, of great accuracy; anxious rather to understate facts, and to counteract every...” Hübler (1983, pp. 5-6) interprets the quote as reflecting an 18th-century English cultural trend where *understatement* became part of the bourgeois ethical code. He views “anxious rather to understate facts” as evidence of a linguistic shift during the Enlightenment, when modesty, self-restraint, and refined conversation were prized.

On the other hand, information available on *meiosis* is rather restricted. Based on Etymonline, the word *meiosis* comes from the Greek *meiosis*, meaning “a lessening,” rooted in *meioun* (“to lessen”) and *meion* (“less”), tracing further back to the Proto-Indo-European root *mei-* (2), meaning “small” (Harper, n.d.). First used rhetorically in the 1580s to describe *understatement* for emphasis, it gained its biological sense of cell division in 1905. OED states that the word *meiosis* originally referred, from the mid-16th century to a rhetorical figure where something important is deliberately presented as smaller or less significant, often to achieve ironic emphasis. By the 17th century, it was also used, though rarely, as a synonym for *litotes*, another form of *understatement*. In the 19th century, *meiosis* briefly appeared in pathology to describe the stage in a disease when symptoms start to decline. Since 1905, its principal use in biology has been to describe the specialised cell division that reduces chromosome number by half, leading to the formation of gametes.

Reflections on Understatement and Meiosis in Academic

Understatement should be addressed first, as there are more extensive studies on the phenomenon in academic literature compared to *meiosis*, which is often limited to simple definitions and has received less comprehensive analysis. Perhaps one of the most intriguing pieces of information found in Hübler’s (1983, p. 5) monograph is the way he connected *understatement* to cultural shifts in English society. It should be noted that there is the widespread but unsupported view that *understatement* is an inherently British phenomenon (cf. Claridge, 2025, p. 76; Sirieix, 2024, p. 104; Vlasova, 2022, p. 57; Katan, 2014, p. 292; Hanks, 2013, p. 230; Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 29). It should be noted that this view overlooks similar

tendencies in other cultures that also value emotional restraint and the use of neutral expressions. For instance, Yoshida and Yonezawa (2024, p. 81) noted that “*in Japan, the term “bonne-to-tatemaie” is used: bonne refers to people’s true feelings and desires, and tatemaie refers to the behaviour and opinions they display in public.*” Likewise, Barinaga (1999, pp. 7-8) discusses *lagom* in Swedish linguoculture, a concept reflecting the balance between “*personal freedom and social responsibility,*” emotional expression and conflict avoidance, and informal interaction and formal respect. In Chinese culture, *face-saving* stresses harmony, dignity, and respect in social interactions (Miao, 2019, pp. 2643-2647). Those examples, though culturally distinct, reveal a shared inclination toward self-restraint and indirectness, echoing what *understatement* often conveys.

As outlined, the term *understatement* refers to “*a pragmatic device for saying less than one means*” (Claridge, 2024, p. 11). The gap between what is said and what is meant must be clear yet still compatible, aiming to make the message more acceptable to the listener by deliberately downplaying emotion (ibid; cf. Israel, 2006, p. 143). Israel (2006, p. 143) claims that “*understatement is a statement which, somehow, because it is conspicuously less informative than some other statement, can be used to express the meaning of the more informative statement.*” For instance, Fogelin (2011, p. 16) discusses *understatement* and *meiosis* as synonymous. On the other hand, Israel (2006, p. 143) considers *meiosis* to be a figurative cousin of *understatement*. Perhaps the key difference between *understatement* and *meiosis*, as Ibáñez (2011, p. 114) explains, lies in the degree of reduction: “*For understatement the mapping takes the form much is little or upper is lower, and for meiosis uppermost is lowermost.*” In other words, *understatement* involves a mild downplaying, whereas *meiosis* entails a more extreme minimisation. To foreshadow this idea, it is interesting to mention that Greene et al. (2012, p. 860) mention that “*meiosis is derogatory*” with Jarvie (2017, p. 159) stating that the “*aim of meiosis is to emphasise the size, importance, etc. of what is apparently belittled*” (cf. Obaretin, 2020, p. 208; Zimmerman, 2005, p. 43).

The structure of *understatement*, as explored by Hübler (1983, p. 71) and Israel (2006, pp. 144-149), reveals a subtle interplay of linguistic form, cognitive reasoning, and cultural tradition. Building on Quirk et al.’s (1972, p. 472) conceptualisation of adverbs of degree, Hübler (1983, p. 71) identifies downtoners as the most relevant class for *understatement* because they alone tend to weaken a predication rather than identify it. He refines Quirk’s categories by introducing a distinction between internal and external detensification, depending on whether the intensity of a quality or the contextual applicability is diminished. On the other hand, Israel (2006, p. 144) approaches *understatement* from a cognitive linguistic perspective, emphasising that “*if meaning is risky, minimising meaning is bound to be attractive.*” He explains that many polarity-sensitive expressions, such as *somewhat, a bit, and sort of*, “*are only appropriate where they weaken the force of the proposition to which they contribute*” (Israel, 2006, p. 149). According to him, these linguistic strategies enable speakers to reduce the strength of their assertions in a structured and grammaticalised manner.

Wierzbicka (2006, pp. 28-33) frames *understatement* within a broader cultural ideology, arguing that “*the concern is that one should not exaggerate [...] one should say strictly ‘no more and no less than what one wants to say’*” (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 28). She links this linguistic practice to “*the Anglo practice of ‘understatement’*” and notes that it illustrates “*the saturation of colloquial English with words and notions deriving from scientific discourse*” (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 33). From her perspective, *understatement* reflects an Anglo cultural commitment to precision, caution, and self-restraint. Neuhaus (2006, pp. 119-128), on the other hand, highlights the complexity of *understatement*, stating that “*they all are non-literal uses of language*” but that “*the contradicting conceptions reveal a lack of clear-cut definitions and missing linguistic explanation for the interrelation and the pragmatic mechanisms behind the figures of speech*” (Neuhaus, 2016, p. 119). Following Israel’s view, Neuhaus characterises *understatement* as occurring when “*what is said is a scaling downward from what is expectable (from the context) and what is meant is more than the default*” (Neuhaus, 2016, p. 128).

While discussing *understatement*, it is important to recognise that it may serve as a strategic instrument deeply rooted in cultural and social conventions. A primary function of *understatement* is to mitigate criticism, enabling speakers to articulate their discontent in a more considerate and socially appropriate manner. For instance, phrases like “*the portions are somewhat small*” minimise direct negativity, maintaining politeness and emotional neutrality (cf. Vlasova, 2022, p. 61; Colston and O’Brien, 2000, pp. 1564-1565; Hübler, 1983, p. 75). It also introduces semantic ambiguity, implying more than what is explicitly stated and encouraging the listener to read between the lines (cf. Neuhaus, 2016, pp. 126-132; Ball, 1970, p. 207). Another function lies in its humorous and ironic potential; *understatement* can highlight absurdity or evoke modesty through the contrast between form and context, as seen in culturally valued expressions of humility (cf. Vlasova, 2022 pp. 57-58; Colston and O’Brien, 2000, pp. 1563-1566). Finally, it offers self-protection by avoiding absolute claims and reducing the risk of confrontation, enabling speakers to remain noncommittal or gently critical (Colston and O’Brien, 2000, p. 1557).

As previously noted, academic literature on *meiosis* remains relatively limited and lacks comprehensive analysis. As a result, the present discussion relies primarily on definitional accounts, with only occasional examples, many of which tend to be repetitive. Nevertheless, even within these definitional frameworks, it is possible to identify three distinct conceptualisations of *meiosis*, some of which diverge from one another more markedly than others. The conceptualisations discussed are illustrated in **Picture 1**.

Picture 1. Conceptualisation of Meiosis Based on Academic Literature

Conceptualisation	Description	Key Features	Key Authors
<i>Meiosis as Understatement</i>	<i>Meiosis</i> is equated with understatement, where the expression is intentionally minimised.	<i>Meiosis</i> deliberately downplays something, signalling that the minimisation is purposeful and meaningful.	Noewen (2024); Walton (2017); Carston and Wearing (2015).
<i>Meiosis vs. Understatement</i>	<i>Meiosis</i> is seen as more extreme than understatement, often with irony or criticism.	<i>Meiosis</i> drastically reduces importance, often creating irony or mockery, with a critical or dismissive tone.	Karp et al. (2021); Dynel (2016); Mora (2009); Zimmerman (2005); Costikyan (2002); Jasinski (2001).
Euphemistic Use of <i>Meiosis</i>	<i>Meiosis</i> softens harsh truths or criticism, often for politeness or social tact.	<i>Meiosis</i> reduces significance to make statements more polite or less confrontational, often using euphemism.	Mohammed and Dawood (2023); Dumitrescu (2012); Phillippova (2003)

Picture 1 presents a table illustrating the varying scholarly approaches to the figure of speech known as *meiosis*. Scholars have offered overlapping yet distinct definitions of *meiosis*, with some equating it to *understatement*, while others highlight more technical or functional distinctions. Generally, *meiosis*, like understatement, involves the depiction of something as less important or significant than it is; however, arguably at a significantly more intense level than *understatement*. It often serves rhetorical, ironic, or stylistic purposes. However, as will be discussed later, the interpretation of *meiosis* differs among authors, which can lead to some confusion regarding its precise nature.

The initial conceptualisation shown in **Picture 1** suggests that *meiosis* and *understatement* are viewed as synonymous devices, with some authors asserting that *meiosis* is merely a Greek word for *understatement* (cf. Abrams, 1999, p. 120; Christensen, 2020, p. 24). Supporting this interpretation, Walton (2017, p. 105) explicitly treats *meiosis* as synonymous with *understatement*. This idea is also upheld by Nouwen (2024, p. 704), who defines *meiosis* as a “*deliberate understatement*” that remains cooperative in communication. Nouwen (2024, p. 705) further categorises *meiosis* as a rhetorical device, highlighting its connection to irony (cf. Sabrina, 2023, p. 45; Carston and Wearing, 2025, p. 79). Building on Walton’s approach, Nouwen (2024, pp. 709-711) uses a three-part model to distinguish *strong meiosis* from *hyperbole*. This model includes (1) what is normally expected (n); (2) what is true (h); and (3) what the speaker says (M). According to Nouwen (2024), *strong meiosis* intentionally downplays reality, often creating an ironic effect. For instance, saying “*nobody came*” when 58 guests attended a party where 30 were expected counts as *strong meiosis*.

On the other hand, **Picture 1** illustrates a viewpoint where some scholars clearly differentiate between the two terms. For instance, Mora (2009) differentiates *meiosis* from *understatement* based on the extent of reduction: while *understatement* simply tones down extreme expressions, *meiosis* goes further by drastically minimising even moderate realities. In his examples, phrases like “*nothing at all*” function as exaggerated minimisations – *hyperbole* in reverse (cf. Mohammed and Dawood, 2023, pp. 68-69). Although this point of view centres on the level of minimisation, other researchers consider *meiosis* from a

different perspective, stressing its purpose instead of its degree. Some point out its evaluative or derogatory function, changing the focus from simple *understatement* to deliberate rhetorical belittlement. For instance, Karp et al. (2021) state that *meiosis* “deliberately reduces [an object’s] significance.” Jasinski (2001, p. 550) echoes this, defining *meiosis* as any effort to depict “something important in terms that lessen or belittle it.” Zimmerman (2005, p. 43) emphasises its degrading tone, and Costikyan (2002) notes its use in humour to subtly dismiss or undercut a subject, particularly in Anglo-American traditions (cf. Walsh, 1892, p. 696). Also, authors like Greene et al. (2012, p. 860) stress that *meiosis* is typically derogatory (contrasted with the often-laudatory litotes) and functions pragmatically, much like irony or hyperbole. In academic literature, Mohammed and Dawood (2023, p. 69) point to Shakespeare’s “*ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch*” (in *Romeo and Juliet*) as a prime example of rhetorical *understatement* used to amplify dramatic irony (cf. Richardson, 2009, p. 104; Abrams, 1999, p. 120).

Another interesting use of *meiosis*, as highlighted by authors such as Dumitrescu (2012, p. 167) and Phillippova (2003, p. 3), is its euphemistic and strategic function. These authors primarily focus on British *understatement*, which often reflects a culturally specific tendency toward restrained or emotionally neutral expression – commonly associated with the “stiff upper lip” (cf. Vlasova, 2022, p. 58) mentality in British culture. Expressions like “*I was a little upset*” are used to suggest strong emotions while maintaining rhetorical restraint. Mohammed and Dawood (2023, p. 69) similarly argue that *meiosis* “*minimises the importance of something through euphemism,*” allowing speakers to soften uncomfortable truths of criticism. Phillippova (2003) notes that *meiosis* is often used to avoid direct statements out of tact or social convention. In addition to these cultural and pragmatic perspectives, other contributions frame *meiosis* within the broader context of implicature and conversational maxims. Davis (2016, p. 60) highlights that *understatement* may invite a “*corrective judgement*” to strengthen interpretation.

Picture 2. Functions of *Understatement* vs. *Meiosis*

Function	Understatement	Meiosis
Softening Criticism	Polite, indirect way to avoid offending; culturally rooted intact.	Euphemistic downplay of serious matters, often to avoid discomfort.
Ambiguity / Implicature	Implies more than said; encourages inference; reduces directness.	Similar use of implicature but may invite ironic reinterpretation.
Humour & Irony	Often subtle; relies on mismatch between words and context.	Strong irony; uses exaggerated minimization for comic or rhetorical effect.
Self-protection	Avoids strong claims.	Offers strategic detachment; helps downplay or deny criticism.
Degree of Minimization	Mild; tones down without major distortion of reality.	Extreme; minimises even moderate facts (sometimes called “reverse hyperbole”).
Derogatory Use	Typically, neutral or polite.	Often belittling, mocking, or dismissive.
Cultural Function	Common in British or high-context cultures to show restraint.	Also culturally shaped, especially in British/Anglo-American <i>understatement</i> traditions.
Key Example	“It’s rather nice” (mild dissatisfaction).	“A scratch” for a fatal wound (Shakespeare).

Picture 2 displays a table summarising the key distinctions between *understatement* and *meiosis*, based on academic literature analysed in this article. The difference between the two appears to lie primarily in their scope and rhetorical intent. Both involve a form of minimisation, yet *understatement* may function as a broader rhetorical strategy, often used subtly to present something as less significant than it might be, potentially for ironic or humorous purposes. *Meiosis*, in contrast, seems to represent a more narrowly defined and marked subtype, typically characterised by a deliberate semantic reduction that creates a sharper contrast between expression and reality, particularly within classical or formal contexts. As indicated in the table, these theoretical distinctions are perhaps more effectively analysed through the examples provided, which highlight variations in semantic minimisation and rhetorical expressivity.

As shown in **Picture 2**, the phrase “*It’s rather nice*” has been selected as an example of *understatement*, while “*a scratch*” from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* represents *meiosis*, previously discussed in this article. Drawing on Hübler’s (1983) classification, the *understatement* relies on the use of downtoners such as *rather*, which allow for interpretative flexibility and a generally mild expressive force. Depending on the context, it can convey anything from modest approval to subtle dissatisfaction. In contrast, the example from *Romeo and Juliet*, where a fatal wound is referred to merely as “*a scratch*,” illustrates a markedly different type of semantic minimisation. Here, the downplaying is so extreme that it creates a tension between literal meaning and actual severity, pointing to a more overt and rhetorically charged form of *understatement* typically associated with *meiosis*.

Table 1. Examples of *Understatement* and *Meiosis*

<i>Understatement</i>	<i>Meiosis</i>
“ <i>It’s a bit hot today</i> ” (Ibáñez, 2011, p. 177)	“ <i>The scratch my client gave to the plaintiff</i> ” (Ruiz, 2011, p. 55)
“ <i>I’m a bit of a disappointment to you</i> ” (Israel, 2006, p. 151).	“ <i>Rather good</i> ” (Ruiz, 2011, p. 55)
“ <i>Yet for most people their MP is not exactly a conspicuous person</i> ” (Israel, 2006, p. 152)	“ <i>It’s just a scratch</i> ” (Ibáñez, 2011, p. 113)
“ <i>He was a little wild</i> ” (Hübler, 1983, p. 89)	“ <i>There seems to be a bit of a queue</i> ” (Ruiz, 2011 p. 184)
“ <i>I knew a quite a lot about it</i> ” (Hübler, 1983, p. 89).	“ <i>He’s had something to drink</i> ” (Claridge, 2024, p. 11)

Table 1 presents examples of *understatement* and *meiosis* drawn from various academic sources. However, the distinctions in the table are somewhat unclear and arguably even confusing, reflecting broader inconsistencies in how these terms are defined. Claridge highlights this issue, noting that “*there is no unanimous definition of understatement, which is made worse by the fact that it is often treated in combination with or as a type of irony and also sometimes equated with litotes*” (Claridge, 2025, pp. 11-12). While Ibáñez (2011) defines *meiosis* as a type of *understatement*, more particularly a more extreme form of minimisation, Fogelin

(2011, p. 16) describes it as occurring when “*someone says something weaker than she is in a position to say; for example, she says that someone else has had something to drink when, in fact, the person she is referring to is utterly intoxicated.*” While Fogelin’s example appears more consistent with Ibáñez’s (2011) initial definition of *meiosis*.

Ibáñez himself later cites the remark “*Chatfield, there seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships today*” (Ibáñez, 2011, p. 19), which more closely aligns with the definition of *understatement* proposed by different scholars (cf. Hübler, 1983; Israel, 2006; Neuhaus, 2016; Vlasova, 2022; Claridge, 2024). Moreover, in the 1939 *Time Magazine* article *Great Britain: Defiance, Deference, Defence*, Admiral Beatty’s remark – made during the catastrophic Battle of Jutland as British ships were being destroyed – is delivered in a restrained, almost casual tone. This reflects a rhetorical *understatement*, where the gravity of the situation is softened without the sharp semantic incongruity typical of *meiosis*. For the remark to qualify as *meiosis*, it would most likely need to minimise the disaster in a more overtly marked and absurdly mild way, such as referring to the sinking fleet as a “*minor inconvenience.*”

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of academic literature and theoretical perspectives presented in the study, it is clear that the terms *understatement* and *meiosis* are often used inconsistently across different sources. Although both ideas aim to reduce or lessen the propositional meaning of a statement, their interpretations and examples differ significantly among researchers. *Understatement* is often considered a pragmatic concept that depends heavily on context and the listener’s ability to infer meaning. It usually entails a deliberate softening of an expression’s literal meaning to express irony, politeness, or a subtle criticism.

Meiosis, in contrast, seems to be interpreted by certain academics as either a particular form of *understatement* or as a separate rhetorical technique. It often entails a more pronounced minimisation, sometimes producing paradoxical or ironic effects. However, the lack of contextualised examples in the academic literature complicates efforts to delineate clear boundaries between the two. As seen in **Table 1**, the examples of *meiosis* provided by various authors are frequently contradictory and lack sufficient pragmatic explanation. Some instances overlap with the category of downtoners, as discussed in Hübler’s (1983) monograph, while others remain vague due to missing contextual framing.

Ultimately, the distinction between *meiosis* and *understatement* may lie in the speaker’s intended meaning and the degree of contrast between the utterance and reality. It should be stated that many researchers consider *meiosis* to be a lesser term within the larger framework of *understatement*, implying a functional similarity rather than a clear distinction. To clarify these uncertainties, additional studies are required, especially those that utilise classical works in Greek and Latin to explore the historical evolution of both concepts and offer contextually rich examples that demonstrate their practical application more distinctly.

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Accessible summary

This article looks at how the terms *understatement* and *meiosis* are used when discussing language and communication. Both terms outline ways for making a statement appear less serious or intense than it actually is. However, their interpretations are not always clear-cut, and different researchers frequently use them in varying contexts. This variability can lead to misunderstandings, particularly in the analysis of humour, irony, or stylistic elements. The article investigates how the two concepts have been defined throughout history and across different academic disciplines to determine if they are genuinely distinct or merely two variations of the same idea. *Understatement* is more commonly utilised and is often associated with everyday politeness or humour. It softens messages, making them feel less direct or emotionally charged. *Meiosis*, on the other hand, appears less often and tends to be stronger in tone. It refers to cases where something is downplayed in an obvious or exaggerated way, often for dramatic or ironic effect. For instance, calling a deadly wound “*a scratch*” or “*just a scratch*” would be *meiosis* rather than *understatement* because of the sharp difference between the words and what really happened. While both forms reduce meaning, *meiosis* usually draws more attention to itself. In the conclusion, the article argues that clearer definitions and more context-based examples could help everyone better understand how these terms work and why they matter in both research and everyday conversation.