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6

HYPERBOLIC APPROXIMATIVE NUMERALS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON

Eva Lavric

ABSTRACT

Examples like Sp. *dos pasos* (two steps), *cuatro gotas* (four drops), *mil veces* (a thousand times), etc. show that there are some applications of numerals in which exact numbers are used systematically to denote indefinite numbers. Such uses are linked to certain very specific numerals, either rather low ones (2, 3, 4, 5), or high but 'round' ones (100, 1,000). They are hyperbolic in the sense that the number indicated cannot be true, and that several variants of one expression (with 100, 1,000, 10,000, etc.) often coexist. Such approximative numerals are linked to – at least partly – similar substantive nuclei across several languages, and they show a high degree of idiomaticity. But the idiomatic expressions differ from one language to another: Sp. *dos pasos* (two steps) corresponds to Ger. *drei Schritte* (three steps). Sp. *cuatro gotas* (four drops) to Ger. *drei Tropfen* (three drops).

This chapter collects and analyses hyperbolic approximative numerals in French, English, Italian, German and Spanish, and describes them through formulae using n for minimization and N for maximization (ex.: $0 = \neg 1n$ *there is not one single* …). The contribution addresses the following questions:

1) What are hyperbolic approximative (uses of) numerals?

2) How do listeners recognize them?

3) What is their function in discourse?

4) What types of nouns are concerned?

5) Which numbers are concerned?

6) What is the cognitive basis of approximative uses?

7) What are the discursive mechanisms that surround them?

8) How are hyperbolic numerals treated in conversation?

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a well-known animal whose name in German is *Tausendfüßler*, in French *mille-pattes*, in Spanish *ciempiés*, in Italian *millepiedi* and in English *centipede*. Actually, there seems to be some dissent among the languages as to the number of legs this animal has, although all languages agree on the fact that it has many of them. Zoologists on the other hand assure us that the number of feet is by no means a round one, and that it differs from subspecies to subspecies.[1] So why does none of the languages give an exact, non-round number, depending on the morphology of the local subspecies? Or why don't they simply call it *manyfeet*?

In fact, all languages **do** give an exact number, but it differs from culture to culture. And they all give an exact and **round** number, a power of 10. Rather surprisingly but understandably, I suppose that nobody actually thinks that this exact and round number corresponds to reality.

This zoological example[2] shows a few very interesting things:

- It is possible to say an exact number and mean an approximative one.
- This works with round numbers like *a hundred* and *a thousand*.
- In such uses, *a hundred* and *a thousand* seem to be interchangeable.
- The hearer does not tend to think that the number is meant literally.

Such non-literal or approximative uses are restricted to certain numerals. If the animal in question were called, e.g. *the 88-feet*, or *the 2,432-feet* in a language, we would probably think that the number was accurate.

This phenomenon has hardly been studied so far. The only studies I know are a subchapter in Channell (1994: 89–90) and a short article by Luján Martínez (1994), who shows the existence of the phenomenon for high round numbers in a variety of cultures. But in fact, it is not restricted to those. An earlier paper I wrote about approximative numerals in French (Lavric, 2007), was entitled: "Comment se fait-il que *sept minutes* soient toujours exactement sept minutes, mais que *cinq minutes* puissent parfois être beaucoup plus?" (How come *seven minutes* are always exactly seven minutes, but *five minutes* can sometimes be much more?) It seems thus that a similar program exists for small numbers.

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[1] Between 18 and 120, but not more than 70 for the European species, says a zoologist friend of mine.

[2] Many thanks to Josef Weidacher for suggesting me this example.

Let us start here with a series of examples (mixed English and French):

(1)   **one** minute, please!

(2)   **a** drop **or two**, but no real rain;

(3)   - À moi, comte, **deux** mots!
       '-Come here, count, for two words!'[3]

(4)   c'est à **trois** pas d'ici
       'that's three steps from here'

(5)   I'll call you back in **five** minutes

(6)   il n'y a pas **trente-six** façons de voir la chose
       (literally: 'there aren't thirty six ways of seeing the thing ... ')

(7)   I can give you **a hundred** reasons for it;

(8)   parmi les **mille et une** manières de faire l'amour ...
       'among the 1,001 ways of making love ... '

(9)   tu n'es encore pour moi qu'un petit garçon semblable à **cent mille** petits garçons
       'you are still to me nothing more than a little boy similar to 100,000 little boys'

(10)   it happens **a million** times a day.[4]

From these examples we can conclude that there are some applications of numerals in which exact numbers are used systematically to denote approximative numbers; i.e. the cardinal corresponds pragmatically to an indefinite quantifier (*a few, many*).[5] We can see that these expressions have a certain degree of idiomaticity, which makes them subject to cross-linguistic variation and valuable for cross-cultural comparisons.

My study will be about French, English, German, Spanish and Italian, but these languages do not have equivalent status in the study: in fact, French acts as a sort of reference language, as for this language I can rely on the corpus constituted by Pierre Rézeau's (1993) "Petit dictionnaire des chiffres en toutes lettres", a complete collection of idiomatic expressions related to numbers, which is based on the systematic analysis of a series of novels in colloquial French.[6] For the other

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[3] In all examples, the interlinear translation is intended to be word by word and not idiomatic.

[4] Here the French examples come from Rézeau (1993), the English ones from my English informants; example 9 is of course taken from Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince".

[5] The meaning-in-use is the same (*a thousand* ⇔ *many*), but the form and the literal meaning are of course different, as *a thousand* literally always means $999 + 1$. Even the predominance of approximative uses for certain very prominent numerals (100, 1,000) does not mean one should alter their basic semantic description (see Lavric, 2007).

[6] This analysis was done initially for Bernet and Rézeau's (1989) dictionary of colloquial French, but it turned out that the numerical expressions were so important that they filled a small volume of their own. In Rézeau's dictionary, the numbers come in mathematical order, and within each number chapter, the expressions related to that special number come in alphabetical order. I thank my colleague Peter Handler for not only indicating, but even offering me this very valuable source book.

languages I simply turned to native speakers, one or two for each of them, and conducted an extended interview with them about the subject.[7] This means that the collection for French is exhaustive, and that it gave me the overall structure of my own corpus (see Table 6.1); while the interviews about the other languages basically followed this structure, thus revealing a number of very interesting convergences and divergences.

This contribution will try to answer the following questions:

1) What are hyperbolic approximative (uses of) numerals?
2) How do listeners recognize them?
3) What is their function in discourse?
4) What types of nouns are concerned?[8]
5) Which numbers are concerned?[9]
6) What is the cognitive basis of approximative uses?
7) What are the discursive mechanisms that surround them?
8) How are hyperbolic numerals treated in conversation?

2. WHAT ARE HYPERBOLIC APPROXIMATIVE (USES OF) NUMERALS?

For this definition we can draw upon the observations we have already made. Our basic definition is that an approximative (use of a) numeral is a (use of a) numeral where an exact number is meant to express a non-exact number. However, according to Channell (1994: 78–90), there are two types of approximative numerals, "plain" ones and hyperbolic ones. "Plain" approximative numerals[10] (Channell, 1994: 79–89) are those "where the precise number given acts as an indicator for a vague interval which is symmetrical about the number given" (p. 89), i.e. when the population of a city is said to be one million, or when a person is said to be six feet tall.[11]

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[7] Many thanks to Andrew Skinner, Tom Rankin, Martha Lavric, Alfonso Merello-Astigarraga and Angelo Pagliardini for being my informants. For the French examples, the numbers following them in the table refer to the page in Rézeau's dictionary. They are all authentic and taken from Rézeau's novel corpus; see there for further references. Many thanks to Carmen Konzett and Philip Herdina for correcting my English.

[8] In examining questions 4 and 5, we shall pay special attention to cross-cultural similarities and differences.

[9] My hypothesis being that the program applies to low numbers on the one hand, and to high and round numbers on the other.

[10] This term is not from Channell, but was coined by us.

[11] For such plain approximative or 'approximate' uses, see also Krifka (2007).

The second type according to Channell (1994: 89–90) are approximative numerals used for exaggeration, i.e. hyperbolic approximative numerals, and this is the type we are interested in.

Following a suggestion by Philip Herdina, we might introduce a terminological distinction between "approximate" uses, i.e. Channell's "plain" approximative uses, where the real number is situated within a rather small interval that surrounds the round number given, and approximative, i.e. hyperbolic, numerals, which are related to the real number of referents in the form of an exaggeration.

Here are some characteristics that may help recognize the latter:

a) The commutability with indefinite quantifiers and with other approximative numerals:[12] whether I speak of *un petit garçon semblable à mille, à dix mille, à cent mille* or *à de nombreux, à bien des, à une infinité d'autres petits garçons* ('a little boy similar to a thousand, ten thousand, one hundred thousand or many, numerous, an infinity of other little boys'), the meaning is always the same, the only thing that varies is the degree of exaggeration, of intensification.

b) The fact that not all numerals are concerned:[13] I might say that I'll come back in *two minutes, in five minutes, in ten minutes, in a minute or two,* and all these expressions correspond more or less to the same vague period of time; but if I say that it starts in *seven minutes, in eighteen minutes* or that it lasts *thirty-seven minutes, eighty-eight minutes* or *one hundred and forty-one minutes,* I must be aware of the fact that these numbers will be taken literally.[14] This means that we are dealing with a norm phenomenon in the Coseriu sense (see Coseriu, 1979; Lavric, 2005), while the basic, mathematical sense of the numerals is part of the language system (see footnote 5).

c) The idiomaticity of the expressions concerned, and hence, their cross-cultural variation, which makes the inter-language comparison very interesting. For example, for rain, and also for drops of milk in a coffee, or for amounts of alcohol, etc., we have the following cross-language correspondences:[15] English *a drop or two,* French *deux gouttes,* Italian *due gocce,* German *drei Tropfen,* Spanish *cuatro gotas;* for a small walking distance, French uses *deux pas* or *trois pas,* German *drei* or *fünf Schritte,* Spanish *dos pasos* and Italian *due passi* (note the correspondence between Spanish and Italian); and if there is really a very small audience at an event or an assembly, the Spanish and the Italian speak of *quattro*

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[12] See Luján Martínez (1994: 161).

[13] This characteristic actually also holds for "plain" approximative or 'approximate' numerals. Krifka (2007) explains why this is the case, i.e. why approximative uses concern mainly 'round' numbers, which are reference points on more coarse-grained scales. Devos *et al.* (1998) relate the probability of an exact interpretation to the fine-grainedness of the scale a number belongs to.

[14] Bultinck (2005: 299) develops a similar reasoning concerning a stick either 1 m long or 1.03 m long.

[15] For a systematic overview and classification of all our examples, see Table 6.1.

gatti, cuatro gatos (literally 'four cats'), the German of *fünf Maxeln* ('five little men'), the French of *quatre pelés et un tondu.* ('four peeled ones and one sheared one').[16]

3. How do Listeners Recognize Them?

Channell (1994: 79, 87–88) asks how approximative uses are identified, and her answer is that it is context and world knowledge together with the 'roundness' of the number that trigger the approximative reading. This is a correct, but rather too general, explanation. Furthermore, we have seen that approximativeness does not only concern round numbers.

As far as hyperbolic approximative numerals are concerned, they can be seen as an excellent example of Grice's conversational implicatures (see Grice, 1975/1989).[17] Listeners conclude that they must be dealing with a hyperbolic approximative use if the following conditions are fulfilled:

a)   the speaker cannot possibly know the number,

and

b)   the number cannot be true.[18]

When somebody uses expressions like Fr. *deux secondes, deux enjambées* (two seconds, two strides), It. *due minuti, due parole* (two minutes, two words), Sp. *te lo he dicho mil veces* (I told you a thousand times), Ger. *auf ein Wort!* ([come] for one word), it is very improbable that he has actually counted the number of steps separating him from a certain place, the number of words he is going to say, or the number of times he has repeated the same information, and it is equally improbable that he will only need two seconds to fulfil a certain task, or two minutes to be back from a certain place, or that one word will suffice to explain his query.

In a normal type of conversation, in which both partners assume that the cooperative principle is valid, the hearer will thus conclude that the numeral is to be understood in a non-literal way, that it is an instance of exaggeration, of hyperbole. He might protest about it and say, e.g. "you are exaggerating", but in general this will not be the case and he will accept it as a very common type of language game and tend not to give it a second thought.

4. What is their Function in Discourse?

Approximative numerals, and especially their idiomatic or semi-idiomatic variants, are normally hyperbolic numerals.[19] They can be hyperbolic in both senses, making a small thing, a small amount, seem even smaller, which in traditional rhetoric is called "meiosis", and they can amplify a big thing, a big number or amount, which would in turn be called "auxesis" (see McCarthy and Carter, 2004: 151).

The goal is always the same: hyperbolic language in general is all about expressivity, concretization, intensification, which is the real point in the use of hyperbolic approximative numerals.[20] The quantification itself might in some cases be utterly redundant: *envoyer quelqu'un aux cinq cents diables, aux cent mille diables, aux quatre cent mille diables* does not mean anything different from *envoyer quelqu'un au diable.*[21]

Here I would like to introduce a symbol for the two possible functions of hyperbolic approximative numerals, i.e. minimizing, which will be represented by the variable n, and maximizing, which will be designated by N; i.e. n is a general formula for small numbers used for meiosis, N for big (and round) numbers used for auxesis. *I'll come back in a second* would be an instance of n, *I told you a hundred times* would be an instance of N.[22] (Based on this, we will be able to give short formulae for a series of derived programs, like $1/n$ or $N+1$, which we will see later.)

Starting from the assertion that approximative numerals are very often hyperbolic numerals, a certain number of points have to be made:

• It has been stated that approximation is something that applies only to certain numbers and not to others. In fact, this is only true for its idiomatic side; but there is also a

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[16] But French also has the expression *il n'y avait pas un chat* ('there was not even a cat').

[17] Channell (1994: 18) speaks of "vagueness by implicature".

[18] McCarthy and Carter (2004: 152–153) see impossibility or counterfactuality as an important test for hyperbole. One important point in this context is the extreme improbability of the very roundness of the numbers concerned.

[19] Approximative numerals in their non-idiomatic variant, i.e. plain approximative or in our new terminology 'approximate' numerals, are usually approximations of specific quantities, e.g. *forty-five minutes* to denote a time interval of three-quarters of an hour plus/minus five or ten minutes (see Krifka, 2007).

[20] The use of the numeral ten in German for expressivity purposes was studied in a short article by Langner (1989).

[21] French for: 'to send someone to 500 devils, to 100,000 devils, to 400,000 devils or simply to the devil'.

[22] And one might be tempted to introduce something like a super-mega-N on the one hand and a super-mini-n on the other, to account for the fact that the degree of exaggeration of approximative numeral expressions may vary from small to huge, as one and the same time span might, e.g., be designated by *two minutes* or by *one second*.

creative aspect to it.[23] In fact, I might perfectly well say: *I've told you three hundred and forty-five thousand six hundred sixty-six times not to do this!* and listeners would certainly not be tempted to take this literally, as the same mechanism of implicature as described above would apply (I cannot know the number, the number cannot be true). I shall call this type of phenomenon "pseudo-approximative uses", and it is clear that it can apply to any number whatsoever. However, this will only lead to some singular, idiosyncratic example of a nonce use here and there, and not to new idioms adopted by the whole language community.

- Approximative numerals are very often hyperbolic numerals, but not all hyperbolic numerals are approximative numerals in the sense described. For instance, there are hyperbolic numerals that do not use exact numbers, but instead expressions such as *dozens, hundreds, thousands*, etc., which are quite frequent means of expressing numerical hyperbole in different languages.[24] They do not correspond to my definition of approximative numerals and have thus not been included in the present study. But they could be included in further studies, as the two phenomena are actually quite similar.[25]

- What I have already included (see Table 6.1) are expressions for empty sets and for totality, as many of them work with exact numerals (ex. *not a penny, vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre*, 24/24 hours) and as they show the same features of hyperbolicity as the core integral number expressions.[26]

Before moving on to the numbers and the types of nouns concerned, let us touch on the question of idiomaticity. What is striking about hyperbolic approximative numerals is the number of variants that exist for most expressions, which means that their idiomaticity has to be seen as a

relative one, an idiomaticity that allows for several variants, although excluding many others.[27] See the following examples:

(11)   Fr. *à cent à l'heure = à deux cents à l'heure = à trois cents à l'heure = à mille à l'heure = à cent mille à l'heure*[28]
'at 100/200/300/1,000/100,000 [kilometers] per hour'

(12)   Sp. *cien veces = quinientas veces = mil veces = cien mil veces*
'100/500/1,000/100,000 times'

(13)   It. *cento volte = mille volte = un milione di volte*
'100/1.000/1,000,000 times'

(14)   Fr. *cent fois = mille fois = dix mille fois = trente-six mille fois*
'100/1,000/10,000/36,000 times'

(15)   Ger. *Es steht eins zu hundert = eins zu tausend = eins zu einer Million*
'the probability is 1: 100, 1: 1,000, 1: 1,000,000'

(16)   Engl. *a moment = a second = a minute = a tick = two ticks = two seconds = two minutes = a minute or two*

There are of course completely idiomatic expressions with numbers, like Fr. *être/se mettre sur son trente-et-un* (to be/to put oneself on one's thirty-one) (to be very well dressed, to dress sumptuously) or *haut comme trois pommes*, (three apples high, referring to a person's height) which have been included at the end of Table 6.1 – because they might be interesting to see and to compare across languages – but are not really the focal point of the present study.[29]

5. WHAT TYPES OF NOUNS ARE CONCERNED?

The types of nouns concerned by approximative numeral uses can be seen in the columns of Table 6.1. They are quite similar in the five languages I have studied. Not very surprisingly, a

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[23] McCarthy and Carter (2004: 150–151) show that hyperbolic expressions in general are subject to a dichotomy between conventionalized, "dead" uses and new, creative, idiosyncratic findings that resemble very much the one that is known to hold for metaphors.

[24] See their study (for English) in Channell (1994: 90–91), as well as in McCarthy and Carter (2004). Note that in French there is a special type of expressions: *une dizaine* (about 10), *une douzaine* (about 12), *une quinzaine* (about 15), *une vingtaine* (about 20), *une trentaine* (about 30), *une quarantaine* (about 40), *une cinquantaine* (about 50), *une soixantaine* (about 60), *une centaine* (about 100), *un millier* (about 1,000), which is an approximation, but not a hyperbole program (see Channell, 1994: 93–94, based on Grevisse, 1975).

[25] This could lead to the inclusion of expressions such as *tons, light years, centuries, aeons* (see McCarthy and Carter, 2004: 176), i.e. plural forms of very big counting units. But then we would be leaving the field of numerical expressions.

[26] This again is an aspect of hyperbolicity that could be related to other quantitative expressions with a strong percentage of hyperbolic uses like *all* or *none*, but this would definitely lead us too far. However, the specialized literature about such expressions can be very helpful when studying our approximative numerals (e.g. Stempel, 1980, 1983).

[27] For French, Rézeau's (1993) dictionary is an extremely valuable source, as it gives precise information about the relative frequency of the expressions concerned. We have taken into account this frequency in our overall table by printing in **bold the most frequent**, i.e. the standard, variants, leaving in plain text the less frequent expressions (e.g. *à/en deux enjambées* [in two strides] is more frequent than *à/en trois/quatre enjambées* [in 3/4 strides], *trois fois rien* [three times nothing] is standard compared to *six foix rien* [six times nothing], etc.). This kind of distinction could of course only be introduced for French, as our methodology for the other languages does not allow frequency counts.

[28] See also It.: *alla velocità della luce*, 'at light speed'.

[29] A good collection of these idiomatic expressions with numbers in French is the book by Bologne (1994). Rézeau (1993) has also collected a great number of these expressions. We take them into account, for all our languages, by adding an annex to our overall table (see part 6 of Table 6.1).

large majority of these represent measuring units[30] of different types, namely:

- Iteration, Repetition: *times*
- Probability: *chances*
- Distance(s): *steps, meters, miles*
- Time: *seconds, minutes, hours, days, years*
- Money: *pennies, cents, dollars*

Apart from this, there are a few "special programs" which are smaller, but recurrent in several languages (see the last column of Table 6.1). These include drops, words and persons present (see above, section 2).

What is striking, however, is the very concrete possibility to use many of the approximative numerals with a vast range of different noun types, virtually with any type of countable noun (see column (a) of Table 6.1). The following collection of examples is only in French, as I have extracted them from Rézeau's (1993) dictionary in order to ensure authentic contexts.[31] (Similar examples could certainly be found in other languages, which could be one of the aims of further studies in the field.)

(17)   Elle passa entre les meubles qui encombraient son chemin en **deux** tours de hanche. Le mouvement était souple et preste, et mou en même temps.
'She passed between the furniture that stood in her way in two turns of [her] hips. The movement was elastic and quick, and soft at the same time.'

(18)   – Vous en faites bien des histoires, pour **trois** brins de lavande!
'What a fuss you are making of three blades of lavender!'

(19)   ... un pastis double troublé de **trois** gouttes d'eau
'a double 'pastis' troubled by three drops of water'

(20)   Des petits films pathétiques qui sortaient dans **trois** salles.
'Small pathetical films that were shown in three cinemas'

(21)   ... être le point de mire de **cent** yeux malveillants et sévères.
'to be the focus point of a hundred ill-willing and strict eyes'

(22)   Ténèbres et silence ne me valaient rien. Si je m'aventurais, l'effroi m'arrivait au galop. **Cent** démons se donnaient rendez-vous dans ma chambre.

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[30] Eschenbach (1995) studies these measuring units, and she distinguishes among them two categories: "*abstract measuring units*" ("abstrakte Maßeinheiten", 1995: 55) like *meters, kilograms* and *hectares*, and "*concrete measuring units*" ("konkrete Maßeinheiten") based on parts of the human body, like *steps, fingers, stone-throws*, etc. It seems that the latter should be especially frequent with approximative numerals, as they belong to the same order of things, see the "distance" section (column c) of Table 6.1. As for the "money" section (column e), it is interesting to note the number of old currencies represented, while there seems to be not a single expression related to the euro.

[31] Remember that Rézeau is working on a large corpus of novels in colloquial French.

'Darkness and silence did not help me. Did I step forward, panic would come galloping on me. A hundred daemons would come together in my bedroom.'

These examples show that approximative uses have to be considered as a possibility inherent in certain numerals, independent of their combination with specific noun types. This is true for small as well as for big numbers, for n and for N.

6. WHICH NUMBERS ARE CONCERNED?

My first hypothesis was that the numbers concerned should be of two types: low numbers on the one hand, and high round numbers on the other, corresponding to the two basic hyperbolic functions of minimizing and maximizing (meiosis and auxesis). But in fact, there is also a certain range of "middle" numbers, from 7 to 20 or 40, which can be used approximately to designate considerable amounts, considerable numbers. In fact, in these middle numbers more than in others, approximativity depends on the context, and they are more likely to have a high percentage of non-approximative uses. What also depends on the context is the choice between meiosis and auxesis, between minimizing and maximizing. Fr. *parler à quelqu'un à trois pas* 'to speak to somebody at [a distance of] three steps' seems to correspond to a considerable number in comparison with our habits, while It. *a cento passi di qui* 'a hundred steps from here' minimizes the distance to be covered. In fact, *a hundred* is the highest numeral to be used either as n or as N (see Table 6.1).[32]

For my reference language French, where my corpus, based on Rézeau (1993), can claim to be representative, I have tried to establish an overview of approximative numerals weighted by their importance (Figure 6.1). I have included only integral numbers and represented the relative
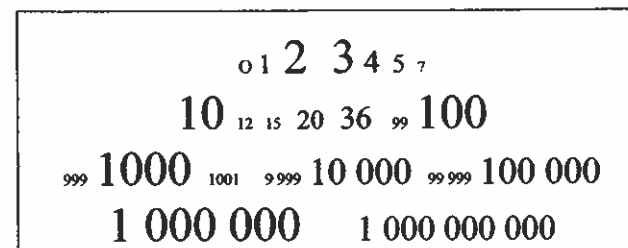

Figure 6.1. Overview of French approximative numerals (only integral numbers, weighted by importance).

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[32] While French *trente-six* '36' is invariably associated with maximizing.

importance of the numeral as an approximator by its size in the graphic. Of course this is only impressionistic, but it can give a first overview of the numbers we shall have to deal with.[33]

Figure 6.1 shows the importance of each numeral in the totality of approximative uses in a given text corpus. What could be done to complete this, would be to include the percentage of approximative uses of each numeral in comparison to its total number of uses and thus to its non-approximative uses.[34]

In my comments about the different approximative numbers, I shall follow this overview for the integral numbers, distinguishing between low, middle and high numbers. But the whole list in fact starts with zero, and that is why the first category will be the ways to express the empty set. This order is also in accordance with the plurilingual Table 6.1. What is added in Table 6.1 are the non-integral numbers, i.e. fractions and percentages, which will be treated here as the last category. Of course, fractions and percentages also have minimizing and maximizing variants, and they especially include expressions of totality – which will result for this part of the contribution in a movement from empty set to totality, and even to more-than-totality, as we shall see.

6.1. Empty set (see 1. in Table 6.1)

The main program for expressing the empty set can be rendered as $0 = \neg 1n$. In all the languages I have studied, the notion of "nothing" can be expressed through the negation of one, plus a very small counting unit.[35] (I am here giving a series of examples for each type of numerical expression I describe. For a more complete collection see Table 6.1).

(23)   Fr. *n'avoir pas un sou/pas un kopeck, être sans un, sans un centime/radis*
        'not to have one sou/one kopeck, to be without one, without a cent/a radish'
        It. *non avere un soldo/una lira/un centesimo*
        'not to have a coin, a lira, a cent'
        Sp. *no tener ni un duro/ni un céntimo*
        'not to have a five-pesetas-coin/not to have a cent'
        Ger. *nicht einen (einzigen) Groschen haben, keinen roten Heller wert sein*
        'not to have a (single) cent, not to be worth a red small coin'
        Engl. *I haven't got a cent = I haven't got a single penny*

In English, very interestingly, there is a similar program but with two instead of one: $0 = \neg 2n$: *I haven't got tuppence = I haven't got two d.* But the richest language for this kind of expressions seems to be Italian, since we have: *non capisco un'acca, non ho un cavolo, non vedo un fico secco*, and in general *non … un cazzo/un cavolo* with different verbs.[36]

6.2. Low numbers (see 2. in Table 6.1)

In the domain of low numbers (ranging basically from one to five) most languages operate preferably with *two* and *three* (see the extensive collection of examples in Table 6.1),[37] but here English has got a special idiosyncrasy, as its preference clearly goes towards *one or two, a … or two* (in the sense of a few).[38] This is very interesting, as this program of coordination or juxtaposition of two consecutive (or near) numbers to express approximation also exists in other languages, but with a different effect. If we take French examples like *deux ou trois, trois ou quatre, quatre ou cinq*, or in the juxtaposition variant *deux trois, trois quatre, quatre cinq*, and also similar expressions with "middle" numbers like *sept ou huit, dix ou douze, douze ou vingt, trente ou quarante*, the effect in all these cases is approximation, but never hyperbole. In all these cases the real number cannot be very far from the range that is being indicated. With English *one or two*, however, we have an expression that is clearly used with a minimizing, hyperbolically exaggerating purpose.

6.3. "Middle" numbers (see 3. in Table 6.1)

"Middle" numbers, i.e. the ones ranging more or less from seven to anything beyond a hundred, are used to express hyperbolically a considerable number in cases where the expected number would be very low, often only one.

For instance, very recently, I witnessed a discussion (in German) where the president of our faculty's curriculum committee complained about having received **seven** different proposals for curricula from department X (while of course it should be normal that a department first agrees on a single common curriculum proposal before sending it to the committee). One participant then asked a question that several of us were asking themselves, i.e. whether "seven" had been meant literally or as a pleasant exaggeration (knowing department X, one could actually not be so

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[33] And it could in a further step be compared with similar overviews for English, German, Italian and Spanish, which would, I think, reveal a great similarity but also certain significant differences.

[34] Such a study was done by McCarthy and Carter (2004: 179–180) for certain English hyperbolic quantitative expressions.

[35] Note that in this case **n** does not represent the number (as the number is *one* in all such expressions), but that it represents a very small counting unit.

[36] 'I don't understand an "h", I don't have a cabbage, I don't see a dry fig, not a … penis, not a … cabbage.'

[37] Five is important too, but only because of its combination with minutes.

[38] For a discussion of this expression as an approximator, see Bultinck (2005: 293–294, 298–299). Bultinck considers the possibility that *a/one (…) or two* might even denote four or more, but he considers it less likely than a reference corresponding to the literal meaning of the expression.

sure ...). And it turned out that the latter had been the case, in fact they had sent in two or three proposals, still far too many. This episode is an interesting example of a metalinguistic negotiation about the approximativeness of a numeral, and it showed that seven can actually be used in a non-literal way, but that it is a less current number for approximation and might give rise to misunderstanding.

This possibility with seven might be due to the fact that it is seen as the perfect number (see biblical and religious traditions), which shows in the following French example:

(24)   *elle avait [...] l'élégance de sept Grace Kelly ...* (Rézeau, 1993: 140)
        'She had the elegance of seven Grace Kellys'

Other "middle" numbers to be used approximatively are 10, 15 and 20, which shows that in the middle range roundness is already an important criterion. One more important number is 12, which is prominent because it is the basis of earlier counting systems (so it **was** round in its time).[39]

But above all, the middle numbers host a very curious French idiosyncrasy, which is the use of thirty-six (*trente-six*) as an approximator, in expressions like our ex. (6): *Il n'y a pas trente-six façons de voir la chose* ('there aren't thirty-six ways of looking at the thing'). This is a very common way of expression in French, so common that it has spread to affect other numbers, since we also find 36,000, and even 46,000 and 56,000 used in a similar way.

The formula for it would be: $\neg\ 36\ =\ \neg\ N\ =\ 1$. The existence of 36 (= many) variants or reasons of, or ways of seeing, something is negated, which means, there is only one variant, or one reason, or one way of seeing the thing in question.

Why thirty-six is idiomatically used for this kind of assertion, is a mystery that still has to be solved. Thirty-six is not a round number, but it is three dozen. It is the number of cases of roulette (leaving out the zero). Maybe it is only a codification of a pseudo-exact use, but maybe further research will show us a clear explanation. Be it what it be, this explanation must go back to before 1306, since this is the year of the first written record (in *Joinville, St. Louis*) of the expression according to the 1994 edition of the "Trésor de la langue française".[40]

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[39] Channell (1994: 84) points out "the importance of 12 in Western European cultures", and she goes as far as writing (1994: 94): "12 and 15 count as round in the French system"; probably because of the existence of expressions like Fr. *une douzaine* ('about 12'), *une quinzaine* ('about 15').

[40] By the way, there might be more such mysteries, as some Spanish informants assert that in Spanish, 'twenty-seven' (*veintisiete*) and 'eighty' (*ochenta*) might have systematic approximative uses. I am still looking for confirmation of this fact.

6.4. High round numbers (see 4. in Table 6.1)

For middle numbers, and for high numbers even more, the major criterion for the possibility of approximative uses is roundness. Therefore, we have to ask what a round number is. The simplest answer would of course be: a round number is a power of 10.[41] But this is true only with our counting systems, where 10 is the basis. In other counting systems, there are other round numbers, always depending on the basis of the system.[42] We do not have to go very far in order to see an example of this, as our own measuring system for time does not function on the basis of 10, but on the basis of 60 (and 12, and 24, etc.). And consequently, for temporal units, *5, 10, 15, 30* and *60* (and *a quarter* and *a half*) are rounder than *a hundred, a thousand* or *ten thousand* and thus more prone to approximative uses.[43]

A special program for maximizing even more would be the multiplication of two high numbers ($N \times N'$), which produces expressions like Fr. *voir trente-six mille chandelles* (to see 36,000 candles), *envoyer quelqu'un aux quatre cent mille diables* (to send someone to the 400,000 devils).

The importance of *a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a million* and *a billion* for numeric hyperbole is a constant in all five languages I have studied, and certainly in many more. It seems, however, that in English this program is more restricted than in other languages: following my informants it works normally with *times*, but much less with distances, money, etc. – see Table 6.1, where English expressions are lacking in the corresponding columns.

A further aspect that has to be pointed out in the context of high round numbers, is two derived programs that exist in several languages and that can be described as $N-1$ and $N+1$. The most

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[41] Sigurd (1988) is a very interesting linguistic contribution entitled: "Round numbers". Sigurd cooperated with a mathematician when writing it, and he is able to give a rather complicated formula that accounts for the fact that, e.g., 150 is rounder than 175. This is interesting, but not really relevant to approximative numerals, as we do not find any of these intermediate cases among them, no 125 or 250, but only simple and clear cut powers of 10. Channell (1994: 81–83) quotes Rosch (1975) to say that round numbers, i.e. multiples of 10, serve as cognitive referent points in the context of the numerical system, in relation to which other numbers are positioned: "in a natural category such as numbers, not all members are equivalent. Certain members of the category serve as reference points to which other members are related" (Channell, 1994: 83). Krifka (2007) explains degrees of salience – and thus of roundness – in numbers by the granularity of the scales they are part of, i.e. 100 is part of a more coarse-grained scale than 150 and must thus be rounder.

[42] See Luján Martínez (1994); see also Channell (1994: 84), based on Menninger (1969). She points out that "six feet is a RPN [reference point number] quantity in Britain and North America, when talking about people's heights" (1994: 84).

[43] For a study about approximative time expressions (but only with the approximator *around*) see Devos *et al.* (1998).

common one is $N - 1$, which gives rise to approximators such as 99, 999, 9,999, and also 99.9 and 99.99 (which, strictly speaking, would be $N - 0.1$ and $N - 0.01$, i.e. subtracting one from the last digit from the right), very prominent with percentages and chances (see below). $N + 1$ is a smaller program with one variant in French: *mille et une* (clearly related to the book, as it is much more frequent in the feminine and is generally used with *et*, whereas the normal form in counting would be *mille un*),[44] and two variants in English, *a hundred and one* and *a million and one* – all these expressions being used above all to refer to a great variety.

6.5. Non-integral numbers (fractions and percentages) (see 5. in Table 6.1)

Approximation is not restricted to integral numbers. Fractions and percentages, too, offer important and interesting possibilities for hyperbolic uses of exact numbers. As for integral numbers, fraction approximators can work in both directions, minimizing and maximizing. A third program that is often expressed through fractions is totality and more-than-totality. All these variants can be described by mathematical formulae with *n* and *N*.

6.5.1. Minimizing. The basic formula for minimizing through fractions is $1/N = n$. A very small number or quantity can be expressed by a fraction with the numerator 1 and a high and round denominator. See the following examples from French and Spanish: Fr. *le quart* ('1/4'), *le dixième* ('1/10'), *le centième* ('1/100'), *le millième* ('1/1,000'), *le millionième* ('1/1,000,000'); Sp. *la millonésima parte* ('1/1,000,000'), *la milésima parte* ('1/1,000'), *la centésima parte* ('1/100'), *la décima parte* ('1/10'), *la cuarta parte* ('1/4').

A related program would be the expression of nothing through the negation of such a fraction; i.e. one variant of $0 = \neg n$ is $0 = \neg 1/N$. In French, e.g. *pas un* ('not a … ') can be intensified to become *pas le millionième d'un* ('not 1/1,000,000 of a … '). This amounts to reasoning "a fortiori": if I haven't seen even the smallest part of a policeman, I haven't seen a policeman either. And if I haven't got a cent, I haven't got a euro or a pound either. This is a way of presenting unpleasant things ironically, making them seem less unpleasant through wit and humour.

If we remember the special maximizing program $N \times N'$, it is not surprising that there is a special minimizing program through fractions that corresponds to the formula $1/N \times 1/N'$, featuring in French expressions like *le quart de la moitié* ('1/4 of 1/2'), *le quart du quart* ('1/4 of 1/4'), *le quart du centième* ('1/4 of 1/100'), *un quart de millième de seconde* ('1/4 of 1/1,000 of a second'), *un millième de millième de seconde* ('1/1,000 of 1/1,000 of a second').

6.5.2. Maximizing. Maximizing through fractions is something that is most often related to the $N - 1$ program we have already described in the "high and round numbers" section. The fraction variant of it would be $N - 1/N$, and it is common in many languages: see Fr. *neuf fois sur dix* ('nine times out of ten'), *neuf chances sur dix* ('nine chances out of ten'); Ger. *in neun von zehn Fällen* ('in nine cases out of ten'); Engl. *ninety-nine point nine percent certain*; Sp. *el noventa y nueve por ciento* ('99 %').

6.5.3. Totality and more-than-totality. One very important function of fractions in hyperbole is the expression of totality, as totality can be expressed in a very concrete, striking way through formulae of the N/N type. Here different languages share similar, but not completely identical idiomatic expressions like Fr. *vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre, sept jours sur sept, douze mois sur douze, trois cent soixante-cinq jours par an* ('24 hours out of 24, 7 days out of 7, 12 months out of 12, 365 days a year') and Sp. *veinticuatro horas al día, siete días a la semana, cincuenta y dos semanas al año* ('24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year').

This kind of expression also allows a kind of absurd climax, in expressions like Fr. *vingt-cinq heures sur vingt-quatre* ('twenty-five hours out of twenty-four'), which corresponds to a formula $N + 1/N$ and thus expresses more-than-totality. These expressions are typical exponents of the absurd, humoristic side of hyperbole; e.g. Fr. *avoir onze doigts de pied dans la tombe, le mouton à cinq pattes* ('to have eleven toes in the tomb', 'the five-legged sheep'). Even a further climax cannot be ruled out; see Engl. *thirty-six hours a day*, It. *quarantotto ore su ventiquattro* ('forty-eight hours out of twenty-four').

Before going on to the cognitive, discursive and conversational implications of approximative numerals, let us mention a special program that exists in all five languages: it is the replacement of a numeral by a letter, like a variable in mathematics, see Fr. *X fois, pour la énième fois, à la vitesse grand V* ('X times', 'for the nth time', 'at speed V'), Sp. *equis veces, equis* ('X times', 'X'), Ger. *zig, X, zigmal, X Mal, zum X. Mal* ('-ty', 'X', '-ty times', 'X times', 'for the Xth time'), It. *per l'ennesima volta* ('for the nth time'), and Engl. (a little bit different, but related) *umpteen, umpteen times* and *zillions*. Although it goes beyond what I have defined as approximative uses of exact numbers, it is related to them especially through the use of hyperbole and shows very clearly the complicated patterns of similarities and differences between languages we can find in this highly idiomatic area.[45]

Of course, the lists I have given of hyperbolic approximative numerals in French, German, English, Spanish and Italian can only be tentative. A lot of work remains to be done to complete these lists first for the languages mentioned, and then for more and other languages

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[44] Here are the results of a Google research: *mille et une* 121,000, *mille et un* 74,000, *mille une* 635, *mille un* 4,510.

[45] Rézeau dedicates one whole chapter of his dictionary to this phenomenon (1993: 225–239).

and cultures.[46] It would also be very interesting to carry out a quantitative study measuring the quantitative importance of the phenomenon. Actually, hyperbolic approximative use might well be the most frequent type for certain numerals, which might in turn be the most frequently used numbers.[47]

One could also ask whether there are other linguistic items that are preferred in a hyperbolic variant, as was done in a contribution by Landheer (2007).

And finally, one could ask whether the existence of approximative, hyperbolic uses should affect the semantic description of the numerals concerned. I have discussed and answered this question (negatively) in an earlier paper (Lavric, 2007) and shall not go into any more detail here (see footnote 5).

What is still to be done here is to provide an exploration of the cognitive basis of approximative uses, a discussion of the discursive mechanisms that surround them and finally of the way they are treated in conversation. For this part of my contribution, fortunately, I shall be able to draw on a small amount of existing specialized literature in the fields to be presented.

7. WHAT IS THE COGNITIVE BASIS OF APPROXIMATIVE USES?

When talking about the cognitive bases of approximative uses, one core question might be the nature of the numbers concerned. Why is it that certain types of numbers are prone to hyperbolic approximative uses, and others are not? In order to find out, we shall have to examine the concept of "low number" and the concept of "round number", as they are seen by cognitive psychology.

On low numbers, one interesting study is the one by Pannain (1997), who claims that *one, two, three* and maybe *four* are learned and represented differently with respect to the other numbers. Children first acquire the concepts of *one, two, three* and *many*, long before they learn the counting operation that is the basis for all other numbers (see Hurford, 1987: 141). These first numeric concepts are thus learned by experience and not by counting.

For round numbers, I can refer to Rosch's (1975) study (quoted in Channell, 1994: 81–83), who found that round numbers are cognitively more salient than others; actually they are reference point numbers and such

> reference point numbers [. . .] [are] more 'easily' accessible, and [. . .] faster to interpret [. . .]. [They] require less processing than other numbers, and, therefore, [are] suitable for use in approximations. (Channell, 1994: 83).

Moreover, all parents I've spoken to agree that their children acquired the round numbers 100 and 1,000 long before being able to count as high as that. Of course, they used them not as exact numeric designations, but as approximative expressions to denote high quantities. So it seems that the approximative meaning comes first in language acquisition, and that big round numbers might be represented differently from other, "ordinary" numbers. They might be, just like small numbers, part of the empirically learned and represented numerical system which precedes the operation of counting and is independent of it.[48] In effect,

> [According to] research [. . .] concerning the concept of number in human cognition [. . .] evidence is forthcoming that our sense of numbers rests on two distinct cognitive systems: First, a nonsymbolic system of quantity estimation, addition and subtraction that can also be found with animals and infants, and secondly, a symbolic system resting on counting that appears to be genuinely human [. . .]. The first system is inherently approximative, and it mostly shows up with larger numbers. [. . .] The two systems are related to each other, but they fulfil separate roles, and we cannot say that one – say, the approximative one of quantity estimation – is to be preferred over the other. (Krifka, 2007: 114–115)

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[46] Here are a few Turkish examples of hyperbolic approximative numerals that my colleague Manfred Kienpointner has established with the help of one of his Turkish students (Yüksel Güsel; many thanks to both!):

- *iki adém*: 'two steps'
- *üç beş kere/üç dört kere*: 'three five times'/'three four times' (' = two or three times')
- *bir dakika*: 'one minute';
- *beş kuruşum kalmadı*: 'I haven't got five kurusch' (= small unit of old money)
- *Sana bin kere söyledim*: 'I told you a thousand times'
- *Sana yüz kere sordum*: 'I have asked you a hundred times'
- *Ikide bir soru soruyorsun*: 'you are asking two questions in one' (' = ask something many times')
- *yirmi dört saat boyunca uyumadım*: I haven't slept for twenty-four hours

There is no direct equivalent in Turkish for Ger. *es ist fünf vor zwölf* ('it is five to twelve') and Fr. *aller aux quatre cent diables* ('to go to the four hundred devils').

[47] Meninger (1969) (quoted in Channell, 1994: 83–86) describes how "some numbers seem almost to lose their literal meaning (Meninger says the meaning 'fades') when they are frequently used to designate a vague quantity [. . .].[. . .] the exact number meaning 'fades', leaving the signification 'a few' or, more often 'many'" (Channell, 1994: 85–86).

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[48] Here are some more cognitive-psychological studies on numerals, which are discussed in detail in Lavric (2007) and will therefore only be touched upon here:

- Brown (1979) studied the numbers from 0 to 9 with the method of the semantic differential and he shows that numbers have a strong connotative meaning.
- Bromme (1990) shows that there are even numbers that are seen as more even, and odd numbers that are seen as more odd than others.
- Both studies show that numbers convey information that is not purely numerical in the mathematical sense.

8. What are the Discursive Mechanisms that Surround Them?

Another important question concerning approximative numerals is the ultimate "raison d'être" of this kind of mechanism. Why are we using all these hyperboles? Why can't we simply stick to the bare facts? And why do listeners accept without protesting when someone assures them that the shop is *à deux pas d'ici* ('two steps from here'), or that s/he has repeated the same gesture *a thousand times*? One important reason for the use of hyperbolic numerals might be politeness, which tells us, e.g. to minimize the size of imposition and to maximize praise of others and profit for others (see Leech, 1983).

But an interesting answer to the why of hyperbole is given by Stempel (1983) in his article entitled "Zur Rolle der Hyperbolik in der Alltagsrhetorik" (The Role of Hyperbole in Everyday Rhetoric). He explains the use of hyperbole by the co-construction of identities in conversation. All participants collaboratively negotiate their "faces", the presentation of their self, which is very often done through narratives and which definitely requires a certain amount of exaggeration (see also Stempel, 1980). This does not mean that participants are deliberately boasting, but that they are trying to make themselves seem interesting. This can be done through positive, and also through negative exaggeration. Actually, we are ready to present ourselves as a complete failure, rather than admitting that we are just normal and average.[49] Being average or just like everybody else would not be something worth telling or worth talking about. In fact, there are two aspects to it: we want to be interesting as a person, and we want to be perceived as a good narrator. So the narrator sometimes exaggerates at the expense of the character. The listeners will know anyway that it is just a story. That is why we embellish and exaggerate, the main point being that the story should not be banal. The realities we thus construct may not correspond 100% to "objective" reality, but they correspond to our subjective reality, to the way we have lived the facts, and it is this subjective reality that will assure the empathy and the sympathy of our interlocutors.[50]

One important point in it is also the complicity of the listeners: when interpreting a hyperbole, they switch to another mode of understanding, another mode of reception which might be compared to that of readers of fiction.[51] This leads us to our last point, the way in which hyperbolic numerals are treated in conversation.

9. How are Hyperbolic Numerals Treated in Conversation?

Further research about the topic of hyperbolic approximative numerals in several languages and cultures could go into the direction pre-figured by McCarthy and Carter's article (2004) entitled: "'There's millions of them': hyperbole in everyday conversation". The study combines a theoretical overview of hyperbole studies in pragmatics with an empirical analysis of a series of conversational episodes; a large part of the hyperboles analysed are numerical in nature. They are partly of the *hundreds/thousands*-type and partly of our own approximative numerals-type. Moreover, McCarthy and Carter (2004) is the only study I know of[52] that acknowledges both the auxesis and the meiosis type of numeric hyperbole and gives examples of both.[53]

So what can be asked and what can be seen when looking at conversational episodes with hyperbolic numerals? McCarthy and Carter (2004), e.g., carefully analyse listener responses. They show that the literal and the hyperbolic meaning of the expression are both present and that the tension between them creates a complicity, a game, a kind of collaborative fiction (see also Stempel, 1980) between interlocutors. Listeners usually signal their uptake through laughing or other signals, and they may even enter the language game and play it, too, or they may comment on it metalinguistically.

> [...] hyperbolic expressions usually pass without challenge by listeners, who accept them as creative intensifications for evaluative or affective purposes such as humour and irony, and who make their own supportive contributions to the figure of speech (McCarthy and Carter, 2004:150).

This makes the hyperbolic exchange a kind of conversational island, for which a shift in footing usually occurs (from serious to playful or non-literal conversation), which can be shown through various signals uttered by the speaker (*though, d'you know, erm* ...).

In conclusion, we can quote McCarthy and Carter's statement (2004: 153) that

> any full account of hyperbole must have an interactive dimension. [...] hyperbole is validated in interaction and can only be described adequately by including the listener's contributions to the emergent act.

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[49] Stempel (1980) is a comment on the example of a narrator who very cleverly presents himself as a complete loser ("the eternal second" in his area of specialty), maybe fishing for pity, or trying to appear interesting, while "outside the narration" he seems to be rather happy with himself (in fact he is a local champion).

[50] See McCarthy and Carter (2004: 156) reporting Norrick (1982): "the speaker [...] [produces] the hyperbole as a personal, affectively involved, overstated simulacrum of reality."

[51] See McCarthy and Carter (2004: 152): "hyperbole is not heard as an act of lying."

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[52] Apart from a small remark and one single example of meiosis in Channell (1994: 90).

[53] Their examples are quoted and commented on later by Norrick (2004), whose study is less relevant for our subject, as it concentrates on extreme case formulations – and the vast majority of approximative numerals are hyperboles, but not extreme cases. In fact extreme cases have received more attention in hyperbole research than other types of hyperbole that are seen as less strong (see e.g. Schemann, 1994). Maybe approximative numerals are a good counterexample to this assertion, as they can reach very high degrees of exaggeration without being confined to an extreme.

Another relevant point in McCarthy and Carter's work is the fact that it is a corpus study. They draw on the CANCODE corpus of everyday English conversation they themselves have compiled, and try to show how corpus linguistics can help in conversation analysis. They choose a series of linguistic items that seem hyperbole-prone (*dozens of, millions of, a hundred, a thousand, masses of, heaps of, hours, years, endless, gigantic* and the like, a total of 36 expressions, of which five are approximative numerals) and look up the occurrences they find in their corpus. This allows them to give a statistical overview of the proportion of hyperbolic uses in total uses of a certain form, which goes from 100% (*dozens of, zillions of*) to 30% for *a million*, 5% for *a thousand* and 3% for *a hundred*.

This could give rise to a further research program: the expressions presented here, with maybe the additional category of approximators such as *hundreds, thousands*, etc., may serve as an input to a conversational corpus study in languages other than English: French, Spanish, Italian, German.[54] The first thing to do would be to provide the statistical overview for each expression, to see how much it tends to approximative usages and how many of its uses are still exact ones. And finally, one could have a close look at a series of conversational episodes to see how the hyperbolic uses of numerals are integrated in the interaction.

One point that seems to me very promising is to look at their interaction with other markers of quantitative approximation, e.g. rounders[55] like *about, or so* and others, which often occur together with hyperbolical numerals. I shall illustrate what I mean with an example from McCarthy and Carter (2004: 170, ex. 8):

(25)   < $1 > I live in Nottingham now cos I came here to study at the university.
        Been here for about a thousand years.
        < $2 > [laughs]
        < $1 > Em. or it feels like it.

Why does the speaker add *about* to his/her approximative numeral? And why does it create a comical effect? My interpretation would be that the rounder *about* generates the expectation that the speaker will really be as exact as he can in the quantitative information he is about to give, i.e. that he/she would use an 'approximate', but not a hyperbolical numerical expression (see footnote 19). The completely absurd and exaggerated number that follows gives rise to a discrepancy which is perceived as a punch line. Thus, the rounder introducing the hyperbolic numeral helps to reinforce the humorous effect, which is shown by the laughter. As the same happens in another of

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[54] English can be said to have been done already by McCarthy and Carter (2004).

[55] This term was introduced by Prince *et al.* (1982), see Mihatsch's contribution in this volume. Channell calls them "vague additives" (1994: 18) or "approximators" (1994: 44–45). The latter term is also used by Devos *et al.* (1998).

McCarthy and Carter's examples (p. 170, ex. 14), it would be worthwhile to see whether there is a general pattern behind it and whether this also holds for other languages and cultures.

10. Conclusion

Approximative numerals are very often hyperbolic numerals. They basically come in two types, small numbers and high round numbers, and they are idiomatic only to a certain point – though these idiomaticities can give rise to interesting comparisons between languages. They have preferences for certain types of nouns, but they can basically occur with any countable noun. They follow certain rhetoric schemes that can be described by formulae like $0 = \neg 1n$, $1/N \times 1/N$ or $N + 1/N$, and they do this cross-linguistically, but with some idiosyncrasies, like French *trente-six* (36). They generally use numbers that are represented differently than others and are learnt by children through experience and not through counting. They are used by speakers for exaggeration and intensification, with the aim of making their speech and themselves seem more interesting to their interlocutors. And, they are co-constructed in conversation as a special kind of non-literal footing, whose micro-effects in conversation still have to be studied in greater detail.

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Table 6.1. (Hyperbolic) Approximative Numerals in French, Italian, Spanish, German and English Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Typology.

(Very frequent expressions are printed in bold letters, in comparison with others which can also be found, but less frequently. French examples are followed by numbers which refer to Rézeau's *Dictionnaire*; for the other languages, my thanks go to Angelo Pagliardini, Alfonso Merello Astigarraga, Martha Lavric, Andrew Skinner and Tom Rankin)

Quantity/ number	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type: *(or small subcategories words, rain, persons present)*	(b) Iteration/ repetition, probability: *times, chances*	Types of nouns (c) Distance(s): *steps, meters, miles*	(d) Time: *seconds, minutes, hours, days, years*	(e) Money: *pennies, cents, dollars*
1. Empty set[a] (often negation + one unit, or negation + very small quantity)					
	Fr ... à zéro (16-19) pas pour un sou/deux sous de ... (68) *It* non ... un cavolo/un fico secco/un cazzo zero spaccato (= niente niente) *Sp* cero no ... uno *Ge* **nicht der hunderste Teil** *En* zero tolerance Words *Fr* pas un (seul) mot (37) *Ge* nicht ein (einziges) Wort Rain, drops *Ge* nicht ein Tropfen = kein einziger Tropfen	*Ge* **nicht ein (einziges)** Mal = kein einziges Mal	*Ge* **nicht einen Schritt**	*Ge* **nicht eine Minute** haben	*Fr* (n'avoir) pas/plus un sou (42), pas un kopeck (42) 'être sans un (34), *elliptic for* sans un sou, centime, radis deux fois rien (65) trois fois rien (99) six fois rien (138) *It* non avere un soldo/ una lira/un centesimo *Sp* no tener ni un duro/ ni un céntimo *Ge* nicht einen (einzigen) Groschen
	Ge **nicht einen Schritt**				

Table 6.1. *(Continued)*

Quantity/ number	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type: (or small subcategories words, rain, persons present)	(b) Iteration/ repetition, probability: times, chances	Types of nouns — (c) Distance(s): steps, meters, miles	(d) Time: seconds, minutes, hours, days, years	(e) Money: pennies, cents, dollars
	Persons present It non ... un cane/ un'anima Ge (kein Schwein) Fr (il n'y avait) pas un chat				haben = keinen Groschen haben keinen roten Heller wert sein En not a cent not a single penny I haven't got a penny I haven't got tuppence I haven't got two d. (old currency)
2. Small quantity/amount					
2.1. Cardinal number	Fr un(e) ou deux (45) deux (57) deux (ou) trois (57, 66) trois (91) trois (ou) quatre (100) quatre (106) quatre (ou) cinq (121) cinq (ou) six (132) six (ou) sept (139) cinq à sept (141) sept (ou) huit (142) dix (e.g. gouttes) (151) quatorze (165) Sp dos dos o tres tres tres o cuatro cuatro cuatro o cinco cinco o seis seis o siete siete u ocho diez Ge ein, zwei zwei, drei drei En a couple of one or two a ... or two two or three Words Fr dire/toucher un/deux/trois mot/s à qn. de qc. (32, 57, 68, 92) en un/deux mot/s (comme en cent/mille) (32–33, 71) un mot deux mots It due parole due cose Sp dos palabras Ge auf ein Wort! in/mit fünf Wörtern in fünf Worten in drei Sätzen En can I have a word Persons present Fr quatre pelés et un tondu (121–122) It quattro gatti	Fr une ou deux fois/une fois ou deux (45) deux (ou) trois fois (66) trois fois (91) trois (ou) quatre fois (101) quatre ou cinq fois (121) cinq ou six fois (132) pas trente-six (façons de) Sp tres o cuatro veces Ge warte einmal (Austrian) ein-, (oder) zweimal zwei-, dreimal drei-, viermal vier-, fünfmal fünf, sechsmal En two or three times	Fr à deux pas (57, 59) à trois pas (92) à quatre pas (106) à cinq pas (129) à six pas (137) à dix pas (152) à cent mètres (197) à/en deux enjambées (58) à/en trois enjambées (94) en quatre enjambées (110) (être) à deux doigts de (73) (only metaphorically) à deux tours de roue (59) but also: être/habiter à deux minutes It a due passi fare quattro passi fare quattro salti (= ballare un po') a un tiro di schioppo Sp dos pasos dar cuatro pasos (después de comer) a dos manzanas a tres manzanas Ge einen Schritt drei Schritt fünf Schritt(e) zwei Schritt vor und drei zurück hundert Schritte tun ein(en) Katzensprung ein(en) Hupfer enfernt ein Hupferl (Viennese) ein(en) Sprung entfernt En a stone-throw from here	Fr une seconde (45) deux secondes (57) trois secondes (101) cinq secondes (133) en cinq sec(s) (133) dix secondes (157) en quinze secondes (168) une minute (44) deux minutes (57, 65) (en) trois minutes (94) cinq minutes (131) cinq (ou) six minutes cinq (ou) dix minutes dix minutes (156) le temps de compter jusqu'à quatre (106) It un attimo un secondo due minuti cinque minuti dieci minuti due o tre minuti Sp un momentito un momento un segundo dos segundos tres segundos cinco segundos diez segundos un minuto dos minutos tres minutos cinco o seis minutos cinco o diez minutos diez minutos Ge einen Moment ein Moment! einen Augenblick eine Minute zwei Sekunden eine Minute zwei Minuten drei Minuten fünf Minuten zehn Minuten ich komm auf einen Sprung zu dir/ vorbei (indication of time!)	Fr un sou, un rond, une thune (42) (à) deux sous (57, 67–68) avoir pour deux sous/ pour dix centimes de ... (68) (à) deux ronds (67–68) deux (ou) trois sous (67) (à/de) trois sous (101) (à /de) trois balles, trois kopecks (102) (à/de) quatre sous (122) à cinq sous (129) (à) dix sous (152) (à) cent balles (198) (à/de) cent sous (201) trois fois rien (99) six fois rien, dix fois rien trois francs six sous (100) deux francs six sous, cinq francs six sous It due lire quattro soldi Sp tres pesetas cuatro perras cinco duros Ge drei Groschen En a penny or two

Table 6.1. (Continued)

Quantity/number	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type: (or small subcategories: words, rain, persons present)	(b) Iteration/repetition, probability: times, chances	Types of nouns: (c) Distance(s): steps, meters, miles	(d) Time: seconds, minutes, hours, days, years	(e) Money: pennies, cents, dollars
	Sp cuatro gatos / ser/haber cinco gatos y un tambor (en las manifestaciones) / Ge fünf Mäxeln / Rain, drops / Fr deux gouttes / trois gouttes / It due gocce / Sp cuatro gotas / Ge drei Tropfen / En a drop or two			En a moment / a second / a minute / two minutes / a couple of minutes / a minute or two / five minutes / ten minutes (or so) / a tick / two ticks	
2.2. Iteration/repetition in time or distance		Fr deux fois (par jour ...) (65)	Fr tous les/toutes les dix + indication of time or distance (159) / Ge alle fünf Meter / alle zehn Schritt / alle hundert Schritt / alle hundert Meter	Fr toutes les cinq secondes (133) / tous les/toutes les dix + indication of time or distance (159) / toutes les trente secondes (180) / toutes les quarante secondes (190)	
				toutes les deux minutes (66) / toutes les cinq minutes (132) / Sp cada cinco segundos / cada diez minutos / Ge alle drei Minuten / alle fünf Minuten / alle zwei, drei Jahre / En every five minutes (or so)	
2.3. Ordinal number		Fr (c'est) la première et la dernière fois (47) / Ge es ist das erste und das letzte Mal / zum ersten und zum letzten Mal / En it's the first and the last time		Ge in der ersten Minute / auf den ersten Blick / im ersten Moment	

3. (Relatively) Considerable amount/number[b]

	(a)	(b)	(c) Distance(s)	(d) Time	(e) Money
3.1. Cardinal number	Fr plus d'un(e) (39) / cinq (ou) six (132) / six (ou) sept (139) / cinq à sept (141) / sept (140) / sept (ou) huit (142) / huit ou dix (147) / neuf ou dix (150) / dix (151) / dix ou douze (156) / douze (161)	Fr pas qu'une fois (44) / sept fois (140) / dix fois (151) / dix-douze fois (156) / quatorze fois (166) / quinze fois (168) / vingt fois (171) / vingt-cinq fois (179) / trente fois (180) / It più di una volta / Sp más de una vez	Fr (e.g.: parler à qn.) / à trois pas (92) / à cinq pas (129) / (e.g. reconnaître qn.) / à dix pas (152) / à quinze pas (167) / cent coudées (199) / à cent pas (197) / à deux cents pas (207)	Fr (dans) six mois (139) / dix ans (153) / vingt ans (171), (seen also as a symbol of youth) / huit jours (147) / quinze jours (168) / (not always approximative) / It quindici giorni	

Table 6.1. (Continued)

Quantity/number	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type (or small subcategories words, rain, persons present)	(b) Iteration/repetition, probability: times, chances	Types of nouns: (c) Distance(s): steps, meters, miles	(d) Time: seconds, minutes, hours, days, years	(e) Money: pennies, cents, dollars
	douze ou vingt (161) quatorze (165) quinze (167) quinze ou vingt (169) vingt (170) vingt-cinq (178) trente (179) trente ou quarante (180) (pas) trente-six (184) Sp más de uno cinco o seis seis o siete diez doce quince veinte cuarenta Ge mehr als ein ninish tenish	veinte veces Ge mehr als einmal fünfzig Mal En more than once a dozen times	être sous quatre pieds de terre (112), à six pieds sous terre (137) It a cento passi Ge hundert Schirtt hundert Meter	Ge acht Tage vierzehn Tage (not always approximative) in zehn Jahren in zwanzig Jahren En a fortnight	
3.2. Ordinal number	Fr le/la dixième (160) le/la quatorzième (167) le/la vingtième (175)	Fr (pour) la huitième fois (148) la dixième fois (160)			
		la quinzième fois (169) la vingtième fois (175) la trentième fois (180) Sp la décima vez la vigésima vez			
4. Big/high quantity/amount/number					
Cardinal number	Fr trente ou quarante (190) quarante (188) cinquante (191) quatre-vingts ou cent (194) cent (195–196) deux cents (207), trois cents, six cents, huit cents mille (211–212) deux mille, trois mille, cinq mille, dix mille, douze mille, vingt-cinq mille, trente mille, cinquante mille (220) des mille et des cents (213) dix mille (218) onze mille (et des) (219) trente-six mille (219) quarante-six mille cinquante-six mille cent mille (220), trois cent mille (221) un million (de) (222) dix millions, cent millions, cent cinquante millions, trois cents millions, dix mille millions un milliard (de) (223–224), cent milliards, mille milliards	Fr trente-six fois (186) quarante fois (189) cinquante fois (192) soixante fois (193) cent fois (199–200) deux cents fois (208) mille fois (215–216) dix mille fois (218) cinquante mille fois (220) cent mille fols (221) des millions, des milliards de fois (223) It cento volte mille volte un millione di volte Sp veintisiete veces ochenta veces cien veces quinientas veces mil veces cien mil veces Ge hundert Mal tausend Mal zehntausend Mal hunderttausend Mal En ten times (a day) a hundred times (a day) a thousand times (a day) ten thousand times	Fr à cent mètres (197) à cent pas (197) (être) à cent lieues (de) (197), à mille lieues de (214) Sp a cien metros a mil metros Ge hundert Schitt hundert Meter	Fr soixante minutes (193) cent ans (198) cent sept ans (206) cent cinquante ans (207) trois cents ans Sp sesenta minutos cien años It cent'anni è un secolo che ti aspetto Ge in hundert Jahr(en) das tausendjährige Reich	Fr coûter/valoir/gagner des cents et des mille (201), des mille et des cents (213) Sp quinientas pesetas mil pesetas diez mil pesetas **Other nouns** Sp mil colorados, mil azules (pelota vasca) En the sixty-four thousand dollar question Ge (Elferfrage) En you look a million dollars

Table 6.1. *(Continued)*

Quantity/ number	Types of nouns					Other Nouns
	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type: *(or small subcategories words, rain, persons present)*	(b) Iteration/ repetition, probability: *times, chances*	(c) Distance(s): *steps, meters, miles*	(d) Time: *seconds, minutes, hours, days, years*	(e) Money: *pennies, cents, dollars*	
	mille et un(e) (217) *cent et un(e)* (205) *Sp* **cien** **mil** **diez mil** **treinta mil** **cien mil** **un millón** **un billón** *En* **a hundred and one ways of/to ....** **a million and one (reasons, uses ....)** Special program: letters *Fr* **à la vitesse V** *Sp* **equis** *Ge* **zig** **X** **der Tag X** **le jour j** *En* **umpteen** **zillions** **gazillions**	**a million times (a day)** **ten million times** Special program: letters *Fr* **x fois** *Sp* **equis veces** *Ge* **X Mal** **zigmal** *En* **umpteen times**				
Ordinal number	*Fr* **le/la soixantième** (193) **le/la centième** (205) **le/la millième** (217) **le/la mille et unième** (218) **le/la dix millième** (218)	*Fr* **(pour)** **la trente-sixième fois** (188) **la cinquantième fois** (193) **la quatre-vingt-dix-neuvième fois** (194) **la centième fois** (205) **la millième fois** (217) **la mille et unième fois** (218) **la cent millième fois** (221) **la onze cent millième fois** (222), **la millionième fois** (223), **la cent millionième fois** (223) *It* **per l'ennesima volta** **la centesima volta** *Ge* **zum hundersten Mal** **zum tausendsten Mal** **zum hundert-tausendsten Mal** **zum X. Mal** *En* **for the hundredth time** **for the umpteenth time**				
5. Fractions, percentages						
5.1. Small quantity/ amount *(With numerator 1 and a high denominator)*	*Fr* **le/la millionième** (21) **le/la millième** (21) **la centième partie/le centième** (22) **le dixième** (22)	*Fr* **une chance sur dix** (152) **une chance sur mille** (213) **une chance sur un million** (223)	*Fr* **un quart de millimètre** (24)	*Fr* **un quart de seconde** (45) **un dixième de seconde** (45) **un centième de seconde** (22)		

Table 6.1. (*Continued*)

Quantity/ number	Types of nouns				
	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type: (*or small subcategories words, rain, persons present*)	**(b) Iteration/ repetition, probability:** *times, chances*	**(c) Distance(s):** *steps, meters, miles*	**(d) Time:** *seconds, minutes, hours, days, years*	**(e) Money:** *pennies, cents, dollars*
	le quart (22), le quart de la moitié, le quart du quart, le quart du centième le tiers du quart (24) *Sp* la millonésima parte la milésima parte la centésima parte la décima parte la cuarta parte *Ge* zu drei Viertel	*Sp* una oportunidad entre diez una oportunidad entre mil *Ge* die Chance/Es steht eins zu hundert/ tausend /einer Million *En* a chance out of ten a one-in-ten chance a one-in-a-hundred chance a one-in-a-thousand chance a one-in-a-million chance a one-in-a-million find		un millième de seconde (21), un quart de millième de seconde (46), un millième de millième de seconde (46) un millionième de seconde (21, 46) un dix millionième de seconde (46) un quart d'heure (23) *It* mezzo minuto mezz'ora *Sp* una décima de segundo una centésima de segundo una milésima de segundo un cuarto de hora *Ge* ein Viertelstündchen eine Viertelstunde *En* a split second	
5.2. (Realitively) considerable amount/ number	*Ge* jeder zehnte			*Fr Iteration:* tous les quatre matins (125) *Future moment:* un de ces quatre (matins) (126)	
5.3. Half	*Sp* uno de cada dos *Ge* jedes zweite Wort jeder zweite	*Fr* une fois sur deux (44), deux fois sur quatre, cinq fois sur dix *It* la metà delle volte *En* every other time		*Fr* un jour sur deux (45) *Sp* cada dos por tres *Ge* jeden zweiten Tag die Hälfte seines Lebens *En* every other day every five minutes	*Fr* avoir un pied dans la tombe (30) n'y aller que d'une fesse (36) ne bander que d'une (36) ne bosser que d'une mirabelle (37) ne dormir que d'un œil (37) *It* avere un piede nella tomba dormire con un'occhio solo *Ge* mit einem Fuß im Grab stehen mit einem Fuß im Gefängnis stehen *En* to have one foot in the grave to have a foot in the door, both feet in the door
5.4. Majority	*Fr* les/aux trois quarts (25) les quatre cinquièmes (26) quatre-vingts pour cent (26) trois (+ subst.) sur quatre (102) huit (+ subst.) sur dix (147)	*Fr* deux fois sur trois (65) trois fois sur quatre quatre-vingt-quinze fois sur cent (27)		*Fr* deux jours sur trois (65) les trois quarts du temps (25) *Ge* drei Viertel der Zeit	

Table 6.1. *(Continued)*

Quantity/number	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type: *(or small subcategories words, rain, persons present)*	(b) Iteration/repetition, probability: *times, chances*	(c) Distance(s): *steps, meters, miles*	(d) Time: *seconds, minutes, hours, days, years*	(e) Money: *pennies, cents, dollars*
		trois chances sur quatre (102) quatre-vingts chances pour/sur cent (26) quatre-vingt-dix chances pour/sur cent (27)		*Ge* es ist fünf vor zwölf	
5.5. Near-majority	*Fr* les neuf dixièmes (26) neuf (+ subst.) sur dix (149) quatre-vingt-dix pour cent (27) quatre-vingt-dix-neuf pour cent (27) les neuf cent quatre-vingt-dix-neuf millièmes (28) les/à 99,99% (27) *It* il novanta percento il novantanove percento *Sp* el noventa y nueve por ciento	*Fr* quatre-vingt-dix-neuf chances pour/sur cent (27) neuf chances sur dix (149) neuf fois sur dix (149) *Ge* in neun von zehn Fällen zu 99% du hast 99% Chancen, dass … *En* ninetynine percent certain ninetynine point nine percent certain			
5.6. Totality[a]	*Fr* (à) cent pour cent (28) Negation of a negative verb + one unit: n'en perdre pas une (de parole) (36) n'en rater/louper pas une (de sottise) (36) *Sp* cien por cien	*Fr* dix fois sur dix (149)		*Fr* vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre (177) sept jours sur sept (142) trois cent soixante-cinq jours (par an) (208) vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre, trois cent soixante cinq jours par an (178), douze mois sur douze (162) du premier janvier au trente et un décembre (49) *It* lavora ventiquattro ore su ventiquattro *Sp* veinticuatro horas al día, siete días a la semana, cincuenta y dos semanas al año *Ge* vierundzwanzig Studen am Tag 365 Tage im Jahr vierundzwanzig Studen am Tag, 365 Tage im Jahr *En* (open) twenty-four/seven	*Fr* à/des deux mains (58, 64) dormir sur ses deux oreilles (69) *Ge* mit beiden Füßen im Kriminal stehen

Table 6.1. (*Continued*)

Quantity/number	Types of nouns				
	(a) (Countable) Noun of any type: (*or small subcategories words, rain, persons present*)	**(b) Iteration/ repetition, probability:** *times, chances*	**(c) Distance(s):** *steps, meters, miles*	**(d) Time:** *seconds, minutes, hours, days, years*	**(e) Money:** *pennies, cents, dollars*
5.7. More-than-totality **Fraction** *or a number higher than a given standard/norm*	*En* she speaks thirteen to the dozen (= *non stop*)	*Ge* hunderteinprozentig tausendprozentig		*Fr* vingt-cinq heures sur vingt-quatre (178), trente-six heures sur vingt-quatre (178) trente-deux jours par mois (182) *It* lavora quarantotto ore su ventiquattro *Ge* es ist fünf nach zwölf *En* twenty-five hours a day thirty-six hours per day eight days a week	*Fr* avoir onze doigts de pied dans la tombe (30) douze métiers, treize misères (162), treize métiers, quatorze misères (164) j'ai (je n'ai) pas quatre bras (115) la mouche à quatre culs (115), le mouton à cinq pattes (135)
Special case: Inexistent date (= *never*)				*Fr* la vingt-cinquième heure (179) tous les trente-six du mois (186) le trente-deux décembre (182) la semaine des quatre jeudis (116) (les calendes grecques) *It* (gli manca qualche lunedì) (le calende greche) *Ge* am 30. Februar *En* the ... of Julember	

aNeither the empty set nor the totality, I must admit, are approximative numbers. I have included them in this overview because they complete the picture of hyperbolic categories. In fact, most of these empty sets or totalities are such only due to exaggeration, they are certainly not the fruit of an exact counting. Like the other approximative numerals they are part of a rhetoric of intensification through hyperbole; actually the empty set and the totality are the two extreme points of this very strategy. (Which means that in such uses one hundred percent are certainly not ninety-nine percent plus one, and even less 98% + 2 or 97% + 3.)

bThe line between a considerable and a big amount is not so easy to draw; the one between a small and a considerable amount seems comparatively more clear.

APPENDIX: MORE NOUNS (STRONGLY IDIOMATIC, BUT NOT COMPLETELY FIXED EXPRESSIONS)

A.1. French

mots: ne pas connaître/comprendre un (seul) mot (37), dire/toucher un/deux/trois mot/s à qn. de qc. (32, 57, 68, 92), en un/deux mot/s (comme en cent/mille) (32-33, 71)

km/h (velocity) (*kilomètres* remains implicit): à **cent à l'heure** (196), à deux cents à l'heure (207), à trois cents à l'heure (208), à mille à l'heure (213), à cent mille à l'heure (221), **en quatrième (vitesse)** (127)

coups: en deux/trois/quatre coups de … (cuiller à pot) (70,99-100), en deux coups les gros (71), en deux mouvements/temps (71), en deux temps (et) trois mouvements (21), en moins de deux (72), en cinq secs; **être aux/faire les cent coups** (202), cent dix-neuf coups (205), quatre cents coups (209), quatre cent dix-neuf coups (209)

diables: aller/courir/être aux **quatre/cinq cents diables** (209) envoyer qn. aux cinq cents diables (210), aux cent mille diables (221), aux quatre cent mille diables/perpètes (222)

morceaux: en mille morceaux (214), en trente-six mille morceaux (220)

dieux (curses): **vingt dieux** (172-173), cent dieux (199), mille dieux/mille dious (215), milliards de dieux (224);

chandelles: voir trente-six chandelles (187), voir trente-six mille chandelles (220)

métiers, misères: douze métiers, treize misères (162), treize métiers, quatorze misères (164), **trente-six métiers, trente-six misères** (187), cinquante métiers, cinquante misères (187), cent métiers cent misères (187)

volontés: faire (en passer par) **les quatre volontés de qn.**, passer ses quatre volontés à qn. (114), faire les trente-six volontés de qn. (186)

taille: haut comme deux/**trois pommes** (à genoux) (77, 95), gros comme trois liards de beurre (77)

pelés et tondus: quatre pelés et un tondu (un nombre dérisoire de personnes) (121-122), trois pelés et un tondu, trois pelés et deux tondus, trois pelés et quatre tondus, quatre pelés et trois tondus

catégorie/ordre/classe/choix: de premier choix (ordre, plan) (47), **de première classe** (bourre, catégorie, force, grandeur, qualité) (47): *as opposed to everything that is not first ('premier') and that is opposed not by the sense, but by the degree of exaggeration*: de deuxième division (86), de second choix (ordre, rang), de seconde zone (86), de troisième catégorie/classe/ordre/zone (102); de quatrième catégorie/ligne/ordre/rang/sous-sol, etc. (127); de sixième catégorie/ordre (139); deuxième couteau/second couteau (87), troisième couteau (103), quatorzième couteau (87), de second plan (90-91), de dixième ordre (160), de douzième ordre (163), de dix-septième ordre (170), de vingtième classe (174), de trente-sixième catégorie (188)

comme n: comme pas un(e) (31), **comme pas deux** (62), **pour deux** (83), **comme quatre** (109), **comme six** (137), comme dix (153), comme douze (109), comme trente (180), **comme trente-six** (+ nom) (185)

n fois mieux/plus: dix/cent/mille fois mieux/pire, dix/cent fois plus/moins/trop (199-200, 216)

se mettre/se couper: se mettre/couper en quatre/six (123-124)

manquer: il (me, te) lui manque toujours cent sous pour faire cinq francs (202), il (me, te) lui manque toujours dix-neuf sous pour faire un franc (170)

âges: de six à soixante-six ans (141), **de sept à soixante-dix-sept ans** (141)

être sur son trente-et-un

A.2. Italian

a cento all'ora, alla velocità della luce

avere sette vite come i gatti

sudare sette camicie (= faticare molto)

gli vengono **i suoi cinque minuti** (= uno scatto d'ira)

mille volte? – mille? **millanta!** (Boccaccio, ital. antico)

non capisce un'acca, non ho un cavolo, no vedo un fico secco, non capisce un cavolo

un dito di vino, due dita di vino

avere un piede su due staffe (= Ger. zwischen zwei Stühlen sitzen)

decalogo (Moisé): regole, anche se non sono dieci

A.3. Spanish

cuatro pelos

un millón de gracias

mil besos

dos dedos (cortar pelo)

en el quinto demonio

cuatro casas (pueblo pequeño)

buscarle tres pies al gato (de una situación que es obvia, buscar cosas raras …)

tener siete vidas

mil razones

de tres cojones (muy bueno)

cero patatero (no tiene valor)

a las mil maravillas

no me importa un pimiento

a millares

centenares

tres eran tres las hijas de Elena y ninguna era buena (serie televisiva) (alguien que es pícaro, no muy malo …)

A.4. German

17 Euro und ein paar zerquetschte

zwischen zwei Stühlen sitzen

im siebenten Himmel sein

sieben Leben haben wie eine Katze

Siebenmeilenstiefel

fünfe grade sein lassen

das fünfte Rad am Wagen

jemanden buckelfünferln (Viennese)

ein Potschochter sein (Viennese)

einen Achter haben (bicycle)

A.5. English

it's five past three/it's five minutes past three – but: **it's seven minutes past three** (always with "minutes")

If I've told you once, I've told you more than once

If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred/a thousand/a million times

I feel like I ran a mile

Bible: maximum age (German: 70) Engl.: **three score years and ten** (score = 20)

a score = 20scores of volunteers …

give or take a mile; give or take five minutes

7

APPROXIMATIVE EXPRESSIONS AND THEIR LOOSE USES IN CHINESE [☆]

Yongping Ran

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the uses of approximative numerals and numerical expressions in Chinese. Approximative numerical expressions are classified into two main types: one with the discourse marker *ba* and the other without an explicit marker. This chapter then discusses cultural connotations of numerical expressions in well-known sayings and ancient poems, and elaborates on the approximative uses of numerical expressions and their communicative effects in different contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Looseness is one of the pervasive features of language use, which can be observed with lexical expressions, including vague collectives (*bags of, crowds of*), dummy nouns (*thing, stuff*), numerical approximations (*about 40 students, two hours or so*) and so on (Channell, 1994; Cutting, 2007). These expressions have been approached in various ways with the discussions focusing on different aspects of vagueness, fuzziness, ambiguity, uncertainty, indeterminacy, approximation etc., all of which are non-literal or loose uses of language, or particular ways of

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