

Numerals, variation, and language contact

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While monomorphemic lower numerals cross-linguistically tend to be solid formations that resist borrowing, compound numerals may be more prone to external linguistic influence. The identification of “deviant” compound formations in any given language therefore raises the question of whether these numerals are indeed borrowings, or rather residues of earlier structures, or genuine innovations. In this talk, I will discuss two types of deviant numeral compound formations in European languages: vigesimals and subtractive numerals. In otherwise fully decimal languages, vigesimals at some point in time were a widespread phenomenon in Europe: they typically feature a base ‘twenty’ instead of ‘ten’: e.g. ODa. *thrytiugh* (lit. three twenty) ‘sixty’ vs. ODa. *fæmtighi* (lit. five ten) ‘fifty’; MFr. *quatre-vingts* (lit. four-twenties) ‘eighty’ vs. MFr. *soixante* (< La. *sexaginta* [lit. six ten] ‘sixty’). Subtractive numerals, on the other hand, are best known (in Europe) from Latin, where the regular formations based on addition (e.g. *duodecim* [lit. two ten] ‘twelve’) co-existed with formations of the type *duodeviginti* (lit. two from twenty) ‘eighteen’, in which the appropriate number is subtracted from the next decad.

These formations traditionally have been ascribed to language contact (e.g. for an overview Bauer 2004; Vennemann 2013), but recent and new data pertaining to vigesimals and subtractives respectively put these interpretations in a different or renewed perspective. In this talk, I will identify the formal characteristics of the formations, their grammatical context, incidence, timing, and productivity, and relate the findings to the various explanations that have been put forth in the course of time. Where necessary, reference will be made to vigesimals or subtractive numerals elsewhere or to another important type of deviant numeral in Europe, the teens in Romanian (e.g. Ro. *nouăsprezece* [nine upon ten] vs. It. *diciannove* [ten and nine] ‘nineteen’). Comparative analysis of the data and diachronic trends will be carried out against the background of typological correlates of borrowing and types of language contact, providing a full picture of potential scenarios of numerical change.

References

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Keywords

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