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Demotion of numeral nouns from heads to dependents – a cognitive explanation

In several European languages, constructions of the type [_{NP} Q N_{Num} [_{NP} N]] have been reorganized to constructions of the type [_{NP} [_{NP} Q N_{Num}] N]; i.e., a head numeral noun followed by a dependent substance noun has become a dependent of the (new head) substance noun. For instance, the Old Norse phrase in (1) corresponds to the modern Norwegian phrase in (2), which can be shown to be headed by the substance noun *menn*.

- (1) fimm hundruð mann-a
 five hundred\PL;NOM man-PL;GEN
 'five hundred men'
- (2) fem hundre menn
 five hundred[PL] man\PL
 'five hundred men'

Such changes have a semantic, not syntactic, basis – and are cognitively well motivated.

Numeral nouns are measure nouns, and the illustrated numeral constructions are pseudopartitives. Other examples of English pseudopartitives are *a flock of birds* and *three pounds of butter*, and corresponding Norwegian expressions exhibit some of the same tendency for reorganization. Langacker (1987–91) assumes that the head of a construction is a constituent with which the construction shares its profile. According to Kinn (2001), the two nouns of pseudopartitives refer to the same object, but categorize it in different ways. The choice of a head noun is a question of which categorization of the object is given priority. Switching from one to the other is a minor semantic change that motivates the syntactic change.

Croft (1991) argues that quantity-denoting nouns are bad as labels for referents. Another (non-conflicting) way of putting this is to say that things categorized only quantitatively are not as good nominal profiles as things categorized more qualitatively. Linguistic profiling is presumably an aspect of general cognitive figure–ground organization, and things with non-quantitative qualities are better figures than things with only a quantity.

Croft, William (1991): *Syntactic Categories and Grammatical Relations*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Kinn, Torodd (2001): *Pseudopartitives in Norwegian*. Dr.diss., University of Bergen.

Langacker, Ronald W. (1987–91): *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar I–II*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.