

Numerals in Australian languages

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As is widely known, Australian languages have a paucity of numerals: typically, one finds words for ‘one’, ‘two’, ‘three, a few’, and ‘many’. In fact, Hale (1975) proposes that these terms are not genuine numerals, but rather indefinite determiners. Although this proposition has been widely accepted by Australianists and others, Hale’s arguments have rarely been examined or put to the test in a representative sample of languages. In this paper I take issue with Hale’s proposal, and argue that the evidence is not compelling. Evidence from a number of Australian languages reveals that the lexemes at issue are better regarded numerals than indefinite determiners.

Grammatical features distinguishing numerals from indefinite determiners include: potential in many languages for frequency adverbials to be derived from numerals and potential for numerals or derived numerals to function as verbs or preverbs; indefinite determiners do not normally show these characteristics. However, the main focus of the argument will be on the uses of numerals, which can be grouped into five general categories:

- QUANTIFYING — in which the quantificational sense of the word is foregrounded, and the word is used principally to indicate quantity, generally cardinality, sometimes mass (e.g. use of the ‘one’-lexeme with the sense ‘little’);
- REFERENCERELATED — quantity is indicated and concomitantly deployed for referential purposes (e.g. indefinite determiner use of ‘one’-lexeme as ‘a, an’, definite determiner use ‘the same’ — inconsistent with indefinite determiner status);
- QUALIFYING — the numeral is used to designate a quality displayed by an entity, rather than the cardinality of a set (e.g. unithood, separateness);
- INVOLVEMENT — effectively secondary predicate usage (e.g. use of the ‘two’-lexeme in the sense of ‘together, joint participation’); and
- TEMPORALLY MODULATED — where the numeral interacts significantly with that which is quantified over a time span, invoking some element of sequence or ordinality (e.g. frequency of occurrence of an event, ‘one’-lexeme in the sense ‘one by one’).

It is proposed that it is possible to identify a common semantic core represented in all of these uses, which can be regarded as contextual senses involving additional semantic components acquired from the contexts of use by invoking pragmatic principles. The common core is the notion of quantity, embracing both mass (size) and count (number) in many languages. Is this because Australian numerals are — like nominals generally — unspecified for mass vs. count, or are the mass senses secondary, derived by pragmatic inferences? This takes us back to our first question: are these lexemes really numerals? I begin an answer to this question with some pertinent remarks on Australian Aboriginal ethno-arithmetic.

Reference

- Hale, Ken. 1975. Gaps in grammar and culture. In Kinkade, M. Dale, Hale, Kenneth & Werner, Oswald (eds.), *Linguistics and anthropology: in honor of C. F. Voegelin*. Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press. 295-315.