

LLcD Conference 2024

Expressing extreme quantity: a myriad of variants Contrastive, synchronic, diachronic, empirical and theoretical approaches

This thematic workshop has a twofold purpose: (i) to focus on the expression of extreme quantity, i.e. very small and/or very large quantities. This is a particularly rich field of observation for studies in phraseology, as well as for examining the links between quantification and intensification, quantification and argumentation, intensification and expressivity; (ii) to encourage a contrastive and/or diachronic approach, keeping in mind that the expression of quantification, at the levels of the noun phrase and the verb phrase, functions in very different ways in different languages and at different times.

The linguistic expression of extreme quantity can take on a wide variety of forms, from "precise" numerical quantification (*150,000 demonstrators*, the degree of precision of this quantification may be questioned), to approximate numerical quantification (*tens of thousands of demonstrators*), to non-numerical quantification, in the plural or singular (*hosts of demonstrators*, *a crowd of demonstrators*, *demonstrators as far as the eye can see*, *a human tide of demonstrators*): the choice of the singular form gives rise to a massifying effect, which can be interpreted as the impossibility of distinguishing individuals within the mass, or as the desire not to distinguish them. To convey the idea of extreme quantity (whether the quantity is small, *a splash of whisky*, or large, *tons of work*), speakers often resort to metaphors, which offer interesting cross-linguistic perspectives. All these choices are part of the pragmatics of naming, which takes on various forms and functions depending on the language, the period, discourse tradition and the speaker's argumentative strategy. In Old German, for example, designative practices are quite different (cf. Desportes 2000; Pasques 2013), and large quantity seems more regularly, if not exclusively (depending on the type of text), expressed by the singular (e.g. the singular *manec man* to refer to a very large number of soldiers). In Breton, the singular is systematically found after numerical quantification (*eizh kant bugel*, "800 children", *bugel* "child" being in the singular).

It is a well-established fact that the designation of extreme quantity is more or less motivated by reference: the same linguistic sequence (e.g. *the human tide*) can thus refer to quite distinct states of affairs (cf. *a human tide of 2,000 demonstrators invades the streets of Montpellier*: the numerical indication may not live up to the expectation created by the initial metaphor). In emphatic quantification, there is a hiatus (which is more or less accepted as true by the speaker) between the ontological or extra-linguistic number and the linguistic number: the "objectively" large (or small) quantity is then captured in a movement of exaggeration or, on the contrary, reduction. Quantification is in fact linked to intensification processes (cf. Adler & Asnès 2013), for example through hyperbole (*Je ne mettrai pas le bout de l'ongle du petit doigt dans ces spéculations, vous entendez ?*, example cited by Perrin (2014: 43): the negation of the very small quantity expresses, in a hyperbolic way, the categorical refusal of the speaker, through a process of intensification).

Contributions can address any contrastive, synchronic and/or diachronic research question and can cover a large range of topics, such as :

- the morphological variety of the expression of extreme quantity in languages and discourses: in Norwegian, large quantity is regularly expressed by an affix (e.g. the suffix *-rik* in *tallrike ressurser*, [lit. "*number rich resources"], i.e. *a large number of resources*), while small quantity is more regularly expressed at adverbial level (*Vi har minimalt med informasjon om dette emnet*, [lit. "*we have minimal (adv in the neuter form) information about this subject"], i.e. *we have very little information about it*).

- lexical creativity and innovation. In English, this can be seen both in the expression of large quantities (*gazillions / bazillions / jillions / squillions / kajillions / kazillions / gadzillions / gabillions / bizillions / kamillions of...*, etc.), as well as small or possibly equal to zero quantities (cf. emphatic negation: *I saw nothing, nada, zilch, zip*).
- the various processes of semantic and/or morphological change in diachrony, in connection with the expression of large or small quantities. For example, the Old Russian numeral *t'ma* "10,000", which in modern Russian means "a multitude of", undergoes semantic change and grammaticalization as a quantifier. In Old High German, the speaker can choose to describe a crowd as compact, using the massifying singular *ther liut* "the people", or to refer to it as a multitude, using the individualizing plural *ther liut* "the people, the individuals in the crowd" (whereas in modern German, only the plural is available for this lexeme: the semantic opposition massive / countable is no longer relevant).
- the choices made by speakers when several types of designation are possible in 'langue' (as opposed to 'parole'). English, for example, often uses the singular / plural alternation to express large numbers (*a lot of / lots of*, the latter being slightly more colloquial; *loads of / a load of; tons of / a ton of; masses of / a mass of*). Can these choices be related to discourse genres, language registers, notional domains, discourse traditions, etc.?
- the expression of large (or small) number as compared to the expression of large (or small) quantity: are there syntactic, semantic and/or pragmatic, or prosodic differences in the expression of these two extremes, depending on the period and the linguistic area involved? What is the impact of the massive / countable opposition on the choices made by speakers? What is the role of the verb and cases in the expression of large or small quantities (cf. quantitative clauses without subject in the nominative in Slavic languages, e.g. *bakterij razvelos'* [lit. **"bacteria" (Genitive pl.) "proliferate" (past-tense perfective sg)*], "bacteria proliferate")?
- a comparison of the metaphors in use across different languages and periods, whether they be phraseological (*un banc de sardines*, in English *a thimbleful of whisky, a pinch of pepper*, in German *in Hülle und Fülle* [lit. « **in cover and quantity* »] « in abundance, thick on the ground », *wie Sand am Meer* [lit. "like sand on the seashore"]) or not (*a myriad of birds*, in German *ein Haufen Kinder*, "a heap of children"); proposals may also consider the semantic and pragmatic effects of such uses. For example, how does one analyze a phraseologism in Russian such as *Deneg - kot naplakal* [lit. **"Money (Genitive pl) + the cat cried"*], i.e. "we have very little money"? Can this type of construction be found in other languages or in earlier language stages?
- the links between quantification and intensification, when there is a detectable conflict between the choices made by the speaker to talk about a quantifying expression and the quantity "actually denoted". In Norwegian, for example, there is an opposition between the partitive construction *in del av bøker*, "a part of the books", and the expression of a large quantity with the intensifier "hel" in *hel del bøker*, [lit. **"a total part of the books"*], i.e. "a very large number of books". Are these enduring links in the languages represented and across the centuries? Which corpora lend themselves to the observation of these quantifying expressions with an intensifying function?
- on a more theoretical level, it could be worth examining what conditions the choice of linguistic number in expressions of extreme quantity, or the links between quantification and qualification, and/or intensification.
- one might also want to explore the epistemological conditions for comparing languages and states of language, by situating the facts observed within the corresponding linguistic subsystems, and in particular by referring to the structuring of the category of number in the state of the language in question.

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