

The Typology of Number Borrowing in Berber

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It is well-known that numbers can be borrowed, and that higher numbers are more readily borrowed than lower ones (cf. Greenberg 1978). The question of which numbers are most easily borrowed, and in which contexts, has implications for an understanding both of historical change and language contact and of the extent to which the linguistic behaviour of numbers can be related to independent cognitive factors.

In the Berber languages of North Africa, numbers are commonly clear-cut loanwords from Arabic. Many, such as Kabyle or Chenoua, retain as few as two non-Arabic number words; only a minority, like Tumzabt, retain as many as ten or more. Closer examination reveals differences in intensity of borrowing not only between, but within, languages, depending on the items being counted and on whether the numbers are cardinal or ordinal. The syntax of numerals offers further scope for variation.

The Berber languages in question are both closely related to one another and are all influenced by mutually comprehensible varieties of Maghrebi Arabic, allowing what amounts to a controlled experiment, with extremely similar contact situations in different areas yielding a wide spectrum of possible outcomes. Careful examination of this spectrum allows us to set up a typology of numeral borrowing in Arabic-Berber contact. Comparison of more distant examples, such as Japanese and Thai, suggests that this typology has wider applicability. The results appear to correlate well with studies indicating a special role for lower numbers both in short-term memory and in frequency.

References

- Greenberg, Joseph (1978). Generalizations about Numeral Systems. In J. Greenberg, C. Ferguson, & E. Moravcsik (eds.), *Universals of Human Language 3: Word Structure* 249-295. Stanford: Stanford University Press.