

snippets

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Complex numerals with an ablative connector: in support of the measure phrase analysis

Éva Dékány · HUN-REN Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics and ELTE Eötvös Loránd University

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Subtractive numerals have two major components: the number subtracted from (‘minuend’) and the number being subtracted (‘subtrahend’). These are typically linked by a morphological connector (Greenberg, 1978); usually an adposition/case with a caritive (‘without’) or an ablative (‘from’) meaning (Ionin and Matushansky 2018, henceforth, I&M).

- (1) éks bónsaj ki?
twenty without hundred
‘eighty’ (Comrie, 2020) Ket
- (2) un-de-viginti
one-from-twenty
‘nineteen’ (Hurford, 2003) Latin

Apart from some remarks in I&M, the morphosyntax and formal semantics of subtractive numerals have received no coverage. For ablative subtraction, I&M do not provide an explicit structure, but they suggest that semantically, the subtrahend acts as a degree modifier of the minuend: ‘one’ in (2) is like ‘two feet’ in ‘two feet from the house’. I present a new argument for the view that complex numerals with ‘from’ involve degree modification.

The crucial data come from Evenki and Neghidal (Tungusic), where ‘from’ Ps build *additive* numerals. In Evenki, the ablative case indicates source: *agi* ‘forest’, *agi-duk* forest-ABL ‘from the forest’ (Nedjalkov, 1997, 171). In standard Evenki, additives juxtapose the augend and the addend.

- (3) d’ān umūn
ten one
‘eleven’ (Pritsak, 1955)

However, in the northern dialects (e.g., Yerbogachen and Ilimpiya) and in the most eastern dialects (e.g., Dzheltulak), 11–19 feature an ablative connector: (4) (Pritsak, 1955; Nedjalkov, 1997; Nagasaki, 2023; Janhunen, 2024). According to Pritsak (1955), in Yerbogachen (4) exists alongside (3), but the choice between these forms is generally dialectally conditioned (J. Janhunen, p.c.).

- (4) d’ān-duk umun
ten-ABL one
‘eleven’ (Pritsak, 1955) Yerbogachen Evenki

(5) is a corpus example collected in 2019 from Xantayskoe Ozero, a northern variety.

- (5) d'an-duk jijin
 ten-ABL nine.[NOM]
 'nineteen' (Däbritz et al., 2024, BTV_20190816_MyPedigree_nar.041)

In closely related Neghidal, too, the ablative marks sources: *togo* 'fire', *togo-dukkey* fire-ABL 'from the fire' (Oskolskaya, 2024, 243). While additives are normally formed by juxtaposition, an ablative connector is mandatory for 21–29.

- (6) jaan emen
 ten one
 'eleven'
- (7) oyin-dukkey emen
 twenty-ABL one
 'twenty one' (Oskolskaya, 2024)

That ablative Ps/cases can build additives has gone unnoticed in previous typological surveys on complex numerals (Greenberg, 1978; Comrie, 1997, 2020; Hurford, 1975, 2003). Among adpositions/cases, only 'with' and '(up)on' have been recognized as connectors of additives. In as much as addition and subtraction are mathematical opposites, the fact that both can be expressed by an ablative morpheme would be inexplicable if 'from' were an instruction to subtract. This problem does not arise, however, if 'from' in complex numerals is an instruction to *measure* some distance on the number sequence. (On the semantics of prepositional measures, see Matushansky and Zwarts, 2017.)

Latin differs from Evenki and Neghidal only in whether measuring from a reference point proceeds 'upwards' or 'downwards' on the number sequence, which is a matter of conventionalization. In Latin, the measuring is downwards, towards the next-lower multiple of the base, thus lit. 'one from twenty' corresponds to 'nineteen' (2). In Evenki and Neghidal, measuring on the number sequence is upwards, towards the next-higher multiple of the base. Therefore Neghidal 'one from twenty' corresponds to 'twenty one' (7), and Evenki 'nineteen' is 'nine [measured] from ten' (5).

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Éva Dékány

dekanyeva@nytud.hu

HUN-REN Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics

and ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

1068 Budapest

Benczúr utca 33

Hungary