

SQUIB

The long and short of numbers

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In an intriguing squib published in *Linguistic Inquiry*, Arvin Levine (1980) takes up the difference between 'full' and 'short' ways of reading multidigit numerals, i.e. the difference between (1a) and (1b) as ways of reading the figures 2,502, or between (1a') and (1b') as ways of reading 2,512:¹

- (1) (a) two thousand five hundred (and) two
- (a') two thousand five hundred (and) twelve
- (b) twenty five oh two
- (b') twenty five twelve

Levine notes that a numeral that is combined with an overt unit requires the full form:

- (2) (a) one eighty nine (*dollars) oh three (= \$189.03)
- (a') a hundred and eighty nine dollars and three cents
- (b) *eight forty two apples
- (b') eight hundred and forty two apples

He does not provide any details of the conditions under which the short form is

¹ I will ignore two additional ways of reading '2,502':

- (i) two five oh two.
- (ii) twenty five hundred (and) two.

Besides its use as what Levine calls a 'spelling' (rather than a 'reading' proper) of the number, (i) has two common functions: as a reading of the figures after a decimal point, and as a reading of telephone numbers:

- 1,506.891 = one thousand five hundred (and) six point eight nine one
- 667-5110 = six six séven, five óne óne óh.

(I use a comma to mark the intonation break that is obligatory here in American English, ^ for secondary stress, and ´ for primary stress; the pronunciation reflects the assumed constituent structure, a structure different from that for multidigit numerals.) One noteworthy deviation from a strict spelling-out of telephone numbers is the use of 'hundred' and 'thousand' in 'spellings' of numbers that end in two or three zeros:

- 753-2300 = seven five three, two three hundred
- 653-2000 = six five three, two thousand

I regard (ii) as an additional 'full' reading of the number, though it is not completely interchangeable with a reading as in (1a); for example, it is preferred to the latter as a reading of years from 1100 to 1999.

used. In (3), I give a selection of examples in which the short form would normally appear in American English:²

- (3) (a) See page 245. (two forty five)
- (b) He's in room 1012. (ten twelve)
- (c) You should take highway 419. (four nineteen)
- (d) I'm booked on flight 723. (seven twenty three)
- (e) I'm holding ticket 1126. (eleven twenty six)
- (f) She's registered for Physics 318. (three eighteen)
- (g) We have just heard Mozart's concerto in A major for piano and orchestra, Köchel 488. (four eighty eight)
- (h) x_{243} (x sub two forty three)

The forms in (3) might suggest that the short form is restricted to expressions in which it follows whatever material it is combined with. However, there is one ubiquitous class of counterexample to that suggestion, namely addresses:

- (4) 5329 South Dorchester Avenue (fifty three twenty nine; ??five thousand three hundred twenty nine)

Except for cases such as (2a), in which monetary sums can be read in the short form if the monetary unit is suppressed, the following generalization could be given: short readings of numerals are allowed only when the numeral is used as part of a name for something (German *Nummer*) rather than representing a quantity (German *Anzahl*). That generalization would also take in the fact that short readings are odd-sounding in arithmetic expressions or as answers to questions that ask for a quantity:

- (5) ??Multiply eight oh three by two twelve.
- (6) How many apples did they pick?
 - (a) Eight hundred (and) forty two.
 - (b) *Eight forty two.

Moreover, most instances of short readings ((3f, h) are exceptions) allow the option of inserting *number* before the numeral.³

In addition to the monetary sums of (2a), another case in which short readings of *Anzahl* rather than *Nummer* numerals is possible arises in Levine's discussion of fractions, which includes such examples as (7):

- (7) eight forty seven over nine twenty eight (= 847/928)

It is my impression that readings such as (7) sound completely normal only when the speaker presents himself as 'on familiar terms with' numbers of the sorts in question,

² An anonymous referee points out that there are dialect differences with regard to the use of 'short' vs. 'spelling' forms in the readings of some of these items. For example, the American highway I294 is 'aye two ninety four', not 'two nine four', while the British M624 is 'em six two four', not 'six twenty four'. Likewise, (3g) is what an announcer on Chicago's WFMT would say, while his BBC counterpart would say 'Köchel four eight eight' or the full form 'Köchel four hundred and eighty eight'. This last example illustrates an additional transatlantic dialect difference, namely the obligatory (British) vs. optional (American) use of *and* between *hundred* and following digits.

³ In some cases (e.g. (3c)), the version with *number* is strongly preferred to the form without it.

e.g. when it is shared knowledge that he is a specialist in numerical computation. For example, (7) is more appropriate in the mouth of a teacher in an elementary school than in the mouths of the pupils. Likewise, a salesperson is entitled to use short forms of monetary amounts, as in (2a), in quoting prices, but a customer uses them only if he presents himself as knowledgeable about the goods and their prices. I tentatively conclude that short readings of numbers serve two distinct functions: to indicate that the number is a *Nummer* rather than an *Anzahl*, and as a marker of 'familiarity' with the relevant type of numbers, irrespective of whether they are *Nummer*.⁴

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Reference

Levine, A. (1980). Reading writing in 'rithmetic. *Linguistic Inquiry* 11: 250–2.

⁴ Unlike 'exoteric' technical vocabulary, which lay persons are entitled to use if they know it, the 'esoteric' informal vocabulary that practitioners of a particular specialty use among themselves cannot be used by outsiders without giving offense. Non-dentists are entitled to use words such as *incisor* and *premolar* in speaking to their dentists, but a lay person who used an expression such as *upper left three mesial* to his dentist would in effect be saying *tu* to the field of dentistry when he was only entitled to say *vous*.