

# The Connotations of Numbers in Colloquial Arabic: A Pragmalinguistic Study

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**Abstract**—In Arabic culture, numbers have meanings based on old traditions and cultural beliefs. Some numbers have deep spiritual and symbolic meanings that may affect a person's life path. Each group of numbers has a specific meaning attached to verbal number representations. This study pragmalinguistically analyses the use of numbers and their contextual connotations in Arabic. Six numbers are evaluated: two, ten, one hundred, one thousand, seven, and sixty. The study analyses these numbers in different contexts, providing the readers with expressions that portray negative and positive connotations. The study reveals that the number sixty has a negative connotation while ten, one hundred, and one thousand are used to denote exaggeration. The number two is used to express how many times something has been done. Finally, the number seven is a familiar number in different cultures with different connotations. The study also reveals that the connotations of the said numbers are related to social, religious, and cultural values. The study ends with two recommendations for further studies to analyse number connotations in other languages and to conduct comparative studies.

**Index Terms**—numbers, culture, negative connotation, positive connotation, colloquial Arabic

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culture divides people into groups. Ethnicity, gender, location, religion, language, and many other factors play significant roles in shaping one's cultural identity. Culture educates individuals on thinking, interacting, and perceiving the world. In other words, culture is the lens through which one views the world. However, every person has a unique heritage. Even though two people will share certain commonalities in the same situation, the problem is that they may have different everyday cultural experiences or perspectives.

Language is an essential tool for socialization. When a person interacts using another language, they are involved in the culture of its people. Because of this, it is only possible to comprehend other people's cultures by learning their languages, as language is deeply rooted in each culture. Both language and culture define a person's beliefs, traditions, identity, and habits. The relationship between language and culture has always occupied sociolinguists', psycholinguists', philosophers', and philologists' attentions.

It is unsurprising that many studies have recently focused on the relationship between language, culture, and the world. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure theorised that "different languages cut up reality in different ways" (Andersen, 1988, p. 27). He posited that every language is a mirror that reflects its speakers' representations of reality. Saussure suggested a mental link between concepts and labels. He was the first to introduce the term 'langue', internal knowledge, or *competence* as Chomsky referred to it. Saussure also introduced the term 'parole', which corresponds to *performance* in Chomsky's hypothesis (Thomas & Wareing, 2004). Saussure hypothesized that language is composed of signs of two faces just like a coin. No face can be dispensable. The signified (concept) and the signifier (label) and the relation that connects them is the sign (Thomas & Wareing, 2004).

Sapir pioneered the notion of language embedded in culture (Mahdi et al., 2012). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Linguistic Relativity, explains how language affects how we think and interpret reality. This theory has always been controversial. As a matter of fact, this culture-language relationship hypothesis proposed by Sapir and Whorf has two facets or principles. Linguistic relativity theorises that every culture interprets the world differently, and this interpretation is reflected in their language (Brown, 2014). In other words, culture affects how language is used and the terms used in a language. Culture shapes one's language. Culture gives meaning to the words people speak. It determines if any given word carries a positive or negative meaning. Furthermore, cultures provide the required environment for languages to develop. Some expressions may indicate something in a particular culture but indicate something else in another. Krasniqi (2019) provided an example of the expression 'a good day' in European culture indicates a sunny day, whereas, in African culture, it indicates a rainy day. This difference in interpreting the term 'good'

results from the different cultural values. In addition, any changes in cultural values will affect the language used; for example, in the old Arabic culture, the word '*shati:ra*' was used to refer to a *sandwich*. Nowadays, due to cultural changes, almost all Arabs use the English word *sandwich* instead of the Arabic one. Hall (1966) emphasized that effective communication between people of different cultures should be embedded in a cultural context.

Whorf proposed the notion of linguistic determinism. He posited that language influences how we think and determines the nature of our thinking. It provides us with a framework for our ideas and thoughts (Thomas & Wareing, 2004). Linguistic determinism theorises that language determines one's perception of the world; language is a window through which one perceives the world (Brown, 2014). This principle of the hypothesis is disputable based on different justifications. Steinberg and Sciarini (2006) justified this disputable nature by positing that children who are born deaf and mute have their own worldview even though they are without language. They also added that multilingual people have one way of viewing reality. One expects multilingualism would lead a multilingual person to have multi-thought systems. If this is true, one would expect them not to be able to think coherently. In addition, they argued that if language determines or shapes our perception of reality, we are at the mercy of language. How can new inventions or discoveries be made if language labels are not previously founded? The coinage of words in a language depends on people's needs and interests and not vice versa (Steinberg & Sciarini, 2006). In short, one can assert that the relationship between language and culture is not a one-to-one correspondence.

Ilic (2004) suggested that it is crucial to remember that there cannot be any learning or transmitting of knowledge without language, nor can a society function without language. Ilic (2004) highlighted this one-to-many relationship between language and culture. He compared this relationship to a coin of two sides. He posited that knowing what we may learn about a particular culture by studying its language is as important as interpreting words, expressions, and discourse by knowing that particular culture beforehand.

This study investigates the cultural and contextual effects of using numbers in Arabic. It sheds light on how Arabs use numbers in certain cultural and social contexts, giving them positive and/or negative connotations. That is, the study is based on a pragmatological analysis of using numbers. Saeed (2016) defined pragmatics as the hearer's/ speaker's interpretation of language. The importance of this study stems from the fact that it is the first to handle the cultural and contextual use of numbers in Arabic and analyse this use pragmatically.

## II. NUMBERS CONNOTATIONS

There has been a remarkable variety of numerical representations developed by humans over time. Numbers have been given special meanings throughout history, cultural mythology, and religions. Around the world, different cultures have a wide range of beliefs, some rooted in religion and others in traditional practices. They gave numbers several various interpretations. Depending on the culture, numbers can have different interpretations. The spiritual significance might be favourable or foreboding; the exact number may be considered lucky in one country but unlucky in another. For example, the number four in Germany is neutral, whereas, in China, the sound of the number four is the same as the sound of the word 'death'. So, in China, the number four does not exist in their buildings and is considered unlucky (Stewart, 2020).

The significance of numbers has been occupying researchers' minds for a long time. Dawson (1927), for example, investigated the cultural and religious significance of the number seven in Egyptian texts. In his study, he listed all contexts in which the number seven appeared in religious and magical texts of all periods. Saaty and Ozdemir (2013), on the other hand, investigated the magical aspect of the number seven. They demonstrated that to make preference judgements in any pair of elements in a group, the number of elements in that group should not be more than seven.

Regarding number connotations in different cultural collocations, Ayonrinde et al. (2021) illustrated "the cultural relativism of numbers through superstition and foreboding to auspiciousness in different societies" (2001, p. 179). Moreover, Papafragon and Musolino (2002) analysed numbers pragmatically, comparing the interpretation of numbers to the interpretation of quantifiers by describing situations that satisfied the truth conditions of utterances. The result of their study confirmed the claim that cardinal numbers should be treated as distinct from the other quantifiers.

Interestingly, Alavijeh (2013) investigated the significance of the number seven from cultural, religious, social, and mystical perspectives. Religiously, he stated that the number seven plays a crucial role in Islam. He analysed several Quranic verses, Hadiths, and Islamic rituals that manifest the holiness of the number seven. In Christianity, he traced evidence of the importance of the number seven in both the Old and the New Testaments. He listed a number of Biblical quotes illustrating the importance of the number seven. In Judaism, he provided quotes from the Torah in which the number seven is given significance. In Hinduism, Alavijeh illustrated the importance of the number seven in different positions. Alavijeh highlighted the importance of the number seven in different Islamic, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu cultures.

Pratt and Kirillova (2019) investigated numerological superstitions in Chinese and Western cultures. They used socio-demographic, psychographic, and situational characteristics to explain the extent to which guests in Chinese and Western hotels are influenced by particular floor or room numbers. Bender and Beller (2011) scrutinized the counting systems in Polynesian and Micronesian languages. They analysed and discussed the linguistic origins of such counting systems and their cognitive properties.

Finally, other studies focus on the frequencies of numbers in a language. For instance, Dehaene and Mehler (1992) analysed, from linguistic differences, the frequencies of numerals and ordinals for 10, 12, 15, 20, 50, and 100 in different languages like French, English, Dutch, and Japanese. The study observed the frequency of the use of numbers written in words in contexts such as 'ten' to the use of the numeral '10' without paying attention to the contexts of the numbers.

Very few studies have been conducted to reveal numbers' negative and positive connotations, be it on the international level or the regional level. The importance of this study stems from the fact that it is the first to investigate the cultural connotations of numbers in the Arabic languages.

In Arab culture, numbers have had consistent meanings based on old traditions and cultural beliefs for a long time. Some numbers have deep spiritual meanings that affect a person's life path and style. Many numbers have symbolic meanings in addition to their spiritual senses, and it is essential to learn more about these meanings to understand how they affect Arab culture. Because of the importance of numbers in Arab culture, they have been used frequently in everyday conversation. Each grouping of numbers has a specific meaning attached to verbal number representations.

Most Arab countries share the same number of connotations in their verbal communication, with minor differences. For example, comparing Jordan to Egypt, one would notice that most of the number connotations in the colloquialism are the same, which is the case in most Middle East countries as well. Among these numbers with special significance are the numbers (60, 100, 10, 1000, 7, and 2). Each of these has a distinctive connotation.

### III. DATA GATHERING

The present study is qualitative research in which speech samples were collected by a naturalistic observation of daily talks of speakers of the Arabic language in different environments: at work, at gatherings, and at home. The researchers observed and collected the concepts in which the speakers used numbers, categorized them, and explained their meanings. According to the data, the numbers used in context to convey certain messages were limited: ten, one hundred, one thousand, two, sixty-six or sixty, and seven. The following section shows tables presenting the use of these numbers in different contexts, each table presents the contexts in which a number was used, its literal meaning and its connotation.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

#### A. *The Use and Connotations of the Number Ten*

TABLE 1  
THE USE OF THE NUMBER TEN AND ITS MEANING IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

Expressions with the number 10	Literal Meaning	Connotation
1 /eɭfuʔuɭ 10 ʕala 10/	The work is ten over ten	What you did is perfect (perfection)
2 /Xalli ʕenak 10 ʕala 10/	Keep your eyes ten over ten	Watch it very well (monitoring)

As table 1 illustrates, the first expression shows that the number ten expresses the perfection of the sight or the effort. The expression /eɭfuʔuɭ ten ʕala ten/ means that the work or what you have done is ten over ten. That is to say, what one has done is flawless. This expression is used to praise someone's perfect task s/he has just performed. While in the second example, the expression /Xalli ʕenak ten ʕala ten/ means to keep your eyes ten over ten. Number ten here shows that the person should be cautious and watch something very closely and carefully.

Moreover, number ten points to the completion of a cycle, and ten out of ten indicates that someone has got the complete or perfect mark. So, it is used in contexts to express this sense of exactness and perfection.

#### B. *The Use and Connotations of the Number One Hundred*

TABLE 2  
THE USE OF THE NUMBER ONE HUNDRED AND ITS MEANING IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

Expressions with the number 100	Literal Meaning	Connotation
1 /100 ahla wa sahla/	One hundred welcomes	Deep and warm greetings
2 /100 marra ʔultellak/	One hundred times I told you	I have told you hundred times (overstate)
3 /100 marra nadetak/	One hundred times I called you	I have called you hundred times (exaggerate)
4 /100 marra nabahtak/	One hundred times I warn you	I have warned you hundred times (exaggerate)

Table 2 above shows different contexts in which the number 100 is used. In the first example, it is used with a positive connotation. It is used to amplify greetings and make them stronger when a guest is welcomed, demonstrating how warmly they are received. This exaggerated welcome pleases the guest who receives such warm greetings.

On the other hand, in the second example, the number 100 is used with a negative connotation. It is to exaggerate the number of times someone said something to another person reprimanding him/her. In the third example, the number 100

is also negatively associated. It is used to exaggerate the number of times someone called someone else, rebuking them for not responding. In the fourth expression, the one hundred is used with a scolding sense as it is used to show that someone has warned someone else a hundred times and that someone else is regretting not responding. The number one hundred is related to the entirety. When the number is expressed in a percentage, it is considered the ultimate limit once it reaches 100%. The number 100 indicates that it is complete. For the speaker, this number signifies the ultimate number for human capability. For example, when a speaker says, 'I have called you one hundred times', this means the maximum of their ability to tolerate others' behavior of not responding. It reflects the speaker's impatience and exhaustion.

### C. The Use and Connotations of the Number One Thousand

Another number that is frequently used in collocations by the Arabs is 1000. Table 3 below illustrates the use of the number one thousand in different connotations.

TABLE 3  
THE USE OF THE NUMBER ONE THOUSAND AND ITS MEANING IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

Expressions with the number 1000	Literal Meaning	Connotation
1 /1000 mabru:k/	One thousand congratulations	Warmest congratulations
2 /1000 ḥamdulillah ʕala alsalameh/	One thousand thanks to Allah for being well	Thanking Allah for recovering

In colloquial Arabic, 1000 has two meanings. The examples in table 3 indicate that the number one thousand is used with positive connotations, namely, congratulations. The addition of this number expresses extreme congratulations. For example, in the first expression, /1000 mabru:k/ the one thousand congratulations amplify the term to represent the speakers' extreme happiness and joy. Moreover, in the second expression, 1000 is used to express the speaker's happiness for someone's recovery after being sick, after getting out of the hospital, or after returning home safely. Using the number one thousand in this context exaggerates the speaker's feelings positively, as the number has a positive connotation. One hundred is the ultimate number of the age of human beings; consequently, using the number one thousand in contexts expresses what is beyond the speaker's capacity.

### D. The Use and Connotations of the Number Two

In colloquial Arabic, the number two is used mainly with the term hours. Table 4 shows the use of the number two in Colloquial Arabic and its meanings.

TABLE 4  
THE USE OF THE NUMBER TWO AND ITS MEANING IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

Expressions with the number 2	Literal Meaning	Connotation
1 /saʕte:n bastannak/	Two hours waiting for you	I have been waiting for a long time
2 /saʕte:n baʔullak/	Spending two hours telling you	I have been explaining that to you for a long time
3 / saʕte:n waʔif ʕala riḍlaj/	Spending two hours standing on my feet	I have been standing for a long time (waiting)

Table 4 shows that the number two mainly explains a prolonged duration. One can use number two when someone is waiting for another for a long time or talking to another without a response.

Also, the speaker uses the term two hours to show the speaker's annoyance with waiting or talking without being understood. The occurrences of number two in the Arabic language relate to time, whether with hours, minutes, or the term 'times'.

### E. The Use and Connotations of the Number Seven

TABLE 5  
THE USE OF THE NUMBER SEVEN AND ITS MEANING IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

Expressions with the number 7	Literal Meaning	Connotation
1 /bsabiʕ nɔ: mɜ:/	In the seventh sleep	In a deep sleep
2 /sabaʕ doXa:t/	Seven turns	I have been looking for someone/something everywhere
3 /sabʕa wzimmitha/	The seven sins	Doing all evil things
4 /bisse bisabaʕ ʔarwah/	Cat with seven lives	Cats with seven lives
5 /sabiʕ ʔalmustahi:lat/	From the seventh impossible things	It is one of the seventh impossible things

Table 5 above shows that the number seven is used in different contexts with different connotations. In the first expression, the number seven is used to describe someone who is sleeping deeply. The use of the number seven in such an expression indicates that sleeping has levels, and the seventh level is the deepest, which makes it difficult to wake up that sleeping person. In the second expression, the number seven in /sabaʕ doXa:t/ explains the number of times the

speaker turns everywhere looking for someone or something. It has the sense of turning around seven times till s/he has become dizzy. The number seven is also used to denote a kind of exaggeration.

#### F. The Use and Connotations of the Number Sixty

TABLE 6  
THE USE OF THE NUMBER SIXTY AND ITS MEANING IN COLLOQUIAL ARABIC

Expressions with the number 60	Literal Meaning	Connotation
1	/ibn siti:n kalb/	Son of sixty dogs Son of a bitch
2	/ibn siti:n şurmaj/	Son of sixty shoes Son of a bitch
3	/fi: siti:n ?alşa:/	In a sixty calamity Go to hell
4	/fi: siti:n dahja:/	In a sixty calamity Go to hell

Table 6 shows that the number sixty has a negative connotation. In contexts, only the number sixty, not any other number, is used to express the speaker's negative values towards someone. This number is hated and used restrictively for dislikes and negative connotations. It is used in swearing, cursing, and scolding. Besides sixty, the number sixty-six (66) is used for cursing, for example, the son of sixty-six dogs. The sixty or sixty-six may be related to the number 666, the beast idea tied to Satan (Michael, 2010).

#### V. DISCUSSION

As far as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Thomas & Wareing, 2004) is concerned, language shapes our thoughts and behavior. Nothing inherited in numbers *per se* has given them a negative or positive sense. People's need to express their ideas and thoughts drove them to use such numbers in contexts with negative or positive connotations. People manipulate their language and use it to satisfy their needs. Therefore, speakers of a language and their use of it to express their ideas, thoughts, and meanings determine the positive or negative connotations attached to a particular number. It is not the nature of a number that makes us give it positive or negative connotations. Steinberg and Sciarini (2006) stated that thoughts come first and are translated into the language in one's mental capacity. Hence, we are not captured by language.

The data in this study have presented that numbers are used in different contexts to convey different messages. First, the number 10 in /10 şala 10/ 'ten over ten' is used in context to fulfill the meaning of perfection when someone is doing something. Schimmel and Endres (1994) stated that the number ten is the number of completeness and perfection. It is the number of biblical principles, which are the Ten Commandments.

The number one hundred has different connotations. It is used to convey exaggeration with negative and positive connotations. For instance, it is used in /100 ahla wa sahla/ *100 hundred welcomes*. It has a positive connotation and deep welcome, while in /100 marra nabahtak/ *I have warned you hundred times*, it has a negative connotation. For Schimmel and Endres (1994), one hundred is the great round number of perfection in which the percentage is completed by the number one hundred 100%. It is also the ultimate age humankind could live.

The number two is mainly mentioned in the time context. The co-occurrence of this number with timing indicates that doing something takes a long time. For that reason, this number has blaming and accusing connotations. On the other hand, Melnikoff and Bargh (2018) asserted that the human mind is persistent and widely uses dual-process typology, which is the number of pairs and the partnership.

The number seven has wider data. It is a familiar number used by the speaker in different contexts. For instance, /sabaş doXa:t/ 'seven turns', /sabşa wzimmitha/ 'seven sins' and /bisse bisabaş ?arwah/ cat with seven lives. In the literature, number seven has acquired a special significance and has been studied in different research from different perspectives (Dawson, 2014; Saaty & Ozdemir, 2003). It is frequently used in human speech in different contexts in daily life. Besides, Kubovy and Psotka (1976) considered it a dominant number in human brains as it is the number of the capacity processes in the human mind. For example, telephone numbers consist of seven digits, and the maximum number ability to remember numbers is seven (Kubovy & Psotka, 1976).

In addition, Alavijeh (2013) posited that the number seven has a religious symbol in different religions. It is the number of heavens, hells, the days of earth creation, prayers, virginity, and perfection. In Arabic, this number is more likely to be used in different contexts than others.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the use of numbers in colloquial Arabic. The study results show that the words and phrases of different numbers are vibrant. Numbers may convey different messages to people of different cultures. Due to the respective cultural background and tradition, some phrases containing number concepts have far surpassed their original meanings, forming different connotations in different cultures. Many metonymically-motivated meanings could be associated with number concepts.

In this study, some numbers' denotations and connotations have been studied in various contexts. Some of these numbers have positive connotations in some contexts but negative connotations in others. Some other numbers are totally used in contexts with negative connotations. This study has exclusively investigated particular numbers used in

colloquial Arabic. The study is limited to 10, 100, 1000, 2, 7, and 60 or 66. These numbers have different connotations. For instance, the number ten expresses exaggeration as well as perfection. The numbers one hundred, and one thousand expressed exaggerations.

Furthermore, the number two is related to expressions with time or the number of times. The number with the broadest usage is the number seven. It is used in different contexts with different connotations. Differently, the number sixty has a negative connotation, and it is used widely in cursing and scolding. Further studies on using such numbers or others in other languages are recommended. Only then can one compare and contrast the different connotations of using numbers in different languages and different cultures.

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