

*Several, Few and Many\**

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1. *Few* and *many*.

As noted by Jespersen (1970, 106), English *few* takes comparative and superlative suffixes:

- (1) John has fewer books than Bill.
- (2) John has the fewest books of anybody I know.

in a way that makes it natural to take *few* to be an adjective. *Few* also patterns with adjectives in the way it takes degree modifiers:

- (3) John is too rich.
- (4) John has too few friends.

as well as in the way it disallows *much*:

- (5) \*John is too much rich.
- (6) \*John has too much few friends.

But what exactly does the adjective *few* modify? Taking it to modify *friends* in (4) might seem reasonable at first glance, yet would lose the parallelism between (4) and:

- (7) John has too small a number of friends.

in which the adjective *small* modifies *number*, not *friends*. For this and other reasons, I proposed in earlier work<sup>1</sup> that *few* invariably modifies either the noun *number* or its unpronounced counterpart (which I will represent using capitals as NUMBER). The proposal is intended to cover comparative and superlative *fewer* and *fewest*, too, so that we have:

- (8) ...fewer NUMBER books...
- (9) ...fewest NUMBER books...

corresponding to (1) and (2), and clearly displaying the parallelism with:

- (10) John has a smaller number of books than Bill.
- (11) John has the smallest number of books of anybody I know.

In similar fashion:

- (12) John has few books.

should be analyzed as:

- (13) ...few NUMBER books...

The question of course arises as to why:

- (14) \*John has few number (of) books.

is not possible, with overt *number*. Although I do not have a complete answer, it is notable that the sentence improves with a degree modifier:

- (15) (? )John has too few a number of books to qualify for a fellowship.

and becomes quite acceptable with superlative *fewest*:

- (16) (? )John has the fewest number of books of anybody I know.

The generalization seems to be that if *few* is moved away from *number*, as it clearly has been in (15), given the intervening *a*, then the sentence in question is acceptable to some degree. In (16) *few* is separated from *number* by *-est* and perhaps also by an unpronounced counterpart of the *of* seen in:

- (17) They're the best of friends.

The proposal that *few* always modifies either *number* or NUMBER extends naturally to:

- (18) John has bought a few houses this year.

with the analysis:

- (19) ...a few NUMBER houses...

clearly expressing the parallelism between (18) and:

- (20) John has bought a small number of houses this year.

Although *many* is not a perfect counterpart of *few*:<sup>2</sup>

- (21) \*John has bought a many houses this year.

I take the proposal in favor of NUMBER to cover *many*, too, so that:

- (22) John hasn't bought many houses this year.

is to be analyzed as:

(23) ...many NUMBER houses...

## 2. *Every* and *a*.

The contrast between *a few* and *\*a many* recalls that seen in:

(24) They come by every few days.

(25) \*They come by every many days.

These examples are of interest given that *every* is known to require a singular noun.<sup>3</sup> From the present perspective, that requirement is met in (24) by singular NUMBER:

(26) ...every few NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> days

which will also account for the appearance of *a* in *a few*:

(27) ...a few NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> days

In (27) it is the singularity of NUMBER that licenses the presence of *a*.

The status of (25) is more complex than it looks, since *many* can combine fairly well with *every* in certain cases:

(28) (?)They come by every how many days?

(29) ?They come by every so many days.

Both of these are fairly acceptable to me (with (28) interpreted as an echo question and with (29) containing a demonstrative-like *so* similar to that of *He can stand only so much noise*). In the same vein, (21) can be improved:

(30) John has bought a great/good many houses this year.

If we assume that the unacceptability of (21) and (25) is to be attributed to some other factor (to be discovered),<sup>4</sup> then (28)-(30) can also be taken to contain singular NUMBER (which will license *every* and *a*), for example:

(31) ...every how many NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> days

(32) ...a good many NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> houses

Example (29) is similar to the fully acceptable:

(33) They come by every so often.

(34) They come by every once in a while.

Notable is the absence of:

(35) \*They come by every twice in a while.

Given the argument outlined for (26) and (27), either (35) must not contain a singular noun or there must be another factor excluding it. Pursuing the second possibility, consider:<sup>5</sup>

(36) They come by once a year.

(37) \*They come by once two years.

We have, rather:

(38) They come by once every two years.

along with:

(39) They come by once every (\*a) year.

which suggests that (36) might be:<sup>6</sup>

(40) They come by once EVERY a year.

with *every* non-pronounceable only in the presence of *a*:

(41) \*They come by once one year.

Bringing to bear:

(42) They come by once \*(in) a while.

further suggests modifying (40) to:

(43) They come by once IN EVERY a year.

Comparison between this and (34) now leads to the proposal that the *every* of (34) actually originates in a position parallel to the *every*/EVERY of (38) and (39):

(44) ...every<sub>i</sub> once in t<sub>i</sub> a while.

in which case the licenser for *every* in (34) is the singular noun *while*, which can be modified:

(45) They come by every once in a great while.

The question now is why (44) is not possible with *twice* in place of *once* (which would yield (35)):

(46) \*...every<sub>i</sub> twice in t<sub>i</sub> a while.

Possibly, (46) is to (44) as (48) is to (47):

(47) You bought as big a house as we did.

(48) \*You bought as big two houses as we did.

with the movement of *every* past *once* in (44) parallel to the movement of *as big* past *a* in (47).<sup>7</sup>

The proposal just sketched amounts to saying that the possible NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> component of *twice* (which would have to be present if *twice* is essentially equal to ‘two NUMBER times’<sup>8</sup>) in (35)/(46) is not able to license *every* since *every* originates too low down in the structure (and perhaps because the movement of *every* is really remnant movement). If this is on the right track, then (34) and (35) are consistent with the idea developed earlier to the effect that *every* in *every few days* is licensed by NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> (see (26)).

As for (5), it probably should be analyzed, thinking of the existence in some varieties of English of *oftentimes*, as:

(49) ...every so often NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> TIME  
in which *every* is licensed by NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> and *often* is a variant of *many* limited to modifying TIME/*time(s)*, so that (49) is quite parallel to (31). That (5) is close to (29) is also supported by the deviance of (50), parallel to that of (25):

(50) \*They come by every often.

The adjectival status of *often* in (49) (parallel to that of *many* in general) allows us to make sense of:

(51) \*They come by every so frequently.

in terms of the adverbial status of *frequently*, which prohibits it from modifying NUMBER in (49).<sup>9</sup> In part similarly, if neither *a lot* nor *lots* can modify NUMBER or TIME (probably because *lot* is nominal), we can account for the fact that (49) doesn’t allow replacing *often* by *a lot* or *lots*, as reflected in the unacceptability of:

(52) \*They come by every so (a) lot.

(53) \*They come by every so lots.

In this context, consider again (38), which has the somewhat marginal (for me) variant:

(54) ?They come by once in every two years’ time.

More natural for me is:

(55) In three days’ time, you’ll have our answer.

The existence of these suggests that (38) could be further analyzed as:<sup>10</sup>

(56) They come by once IN every two NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub> years TIME.  
with unpronounced IN and unpronounced TIME, in addition to NUMBER.

It is important to distinguish the *time*/TIME of (54)-(56) from the *time*/TIME of (49), *oftentimes* and (57):

(57) They come by three times a week.

The *time*/TIME of (49), *oftentimes* and (57) is a count noun. The *time*/TIME of (54)-(56) is a mass noun, also seen in:

(58) We spent a lot of time(\*s) on that.

(59) In the time(\*s) it takes for the letter to arrive, you’ll have our answer.

(60) \*In three days’ times, you’ll have our answer.

Although English has the same pronunciation for count *time* and mass *time*, French keeps them separate - the count one is *fois*, as in:<sup>11</sup>

(61) Ils viennent trois fois par semaine. (‘they come (by) three times per week’)

The mass one is *temps*, as in:

(62) Nous avons passé beaucoup de temps là-dessus. (‘we have spent great-deal of time there-on’)

Since TIME in (38)/(56) is a mass noun, it is not a potential licenser for *every*:

(63) \*John lost every money.

(64) \*We spent every time on that.

(65) \*Every time it takes for the letter to arrive,...

Rather, the licenser for *every* in (38)/(56) must be NUMBER<sub>sing.</sub>, as proposed earlier.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. *A small(little)/large number.*

Despite the similarity between *a few books* and *a small number of books* and between *many books* and *a large number of books*, (24) and (28)/(29) have no well-formed counterpart with *a small/large number*, e.g.:

(66) \*They come by every (a) small number of days.

(67) \*They come by every how large (a) number of days?

Although these examples differ from the comparable well-formed ones with *every few days* and *every how many days* in containing *of*, the presence of *of* is not sufficient to account for their deviance, given the acceptability of:<sup>13</sup>

(68) They come by every couple of days.

In part the deviance of (54) and (67) may reflect a more general fact about ‘measures’ that is independent of *every*:

(69) We’ll be there in a few days.

- (70) ??We'll be there in a small number of days.
- (71) The baby weighed just a few pounds.
- (72) ???The baby weighed just a small number of pounds.
- (73) How many feet tall is that building over there?
- (74) \*?How large a number of feet tall is that building over there?
- (75) That rock weighs thousands of pounds.
- (76) \*That rock weighs large numbers of pounds.

There may also be a link between (54)/(67) and the deviance of:

- (77) \*They come by every very few days.
- (78) \*They come by every great/good many days.
- (79) \*They come by every good ten days.

with the last of these, for example, contrasting with:

- (80) One visit is usually separated from the next by a good ten days.

Given (69)-(80), especially (77), I take the deviance of (54) and (67) (although more work is needed) to be compatible with the hypothesis I have been pursuing, namely that *few* and *many* are necessarily modifiers either of NUMBER or of *number*.

In the case of *few*, the comparison with *small number* was somewhat misleading, in that there is evidence that *few* is actually closer to *little* than it is to *small*, despite the deviance of:

- (81) ???You've only written a little number of articles this year.
- which, however, improves if *tiny* is added:<sup>14</sup>

- (82) ?You've only written a tiny little number of articles this year.

A reason to take *few* to be closer to *little* than to *small* comes from the 'positive' effect of adding *quite* to *a few*:

- (83) You've written quite a few articles this year.

something of which is also found in:

- (84) That's quite a little discovery you've made there.

but not in:

- (85) That's quite a small discovery you've made there.

with praise being conveyed by (84) but not by (85).

#### 4: *Several* vs. *many* and *few*

Unlike *many* and *few*, *several* does not look much like an adjective. It does not enter into comparison:

- (86) \*John has severaler books than Bill.
- (87) \*John has more several books than Bill.

Nor are there superlatives:

- (88) \*the severalest books; \*the most several books

In addition, whereas *many* and *few* take a range of degree modifiers typical of adjectives:<sup>15</sup>

- (89) too/as/so/how many books; too/as/so/how few books

*several* allows none of these:

- (90) \*too/as/so/how several books

There is also a contrast concerning *a*:

- (91) a few books
- (92) \*a several books

In the same vein:

- (93) a great many books

is not paralleled in interpretation (or matched in acceptability) by:

- (94) ?a great several books

On the interpretation side, *several* might appear to be close to *a few*:

- (95) We're planning to buy a few books.
- (96) We're planning to buy several books.

These seem fairly similar. Yet *a few* can 'expand' in a way that *several* cannot,<sup>16</sup> for example via *quite* (cf. also (84)) and *not*:

- (97) We bought quite/not a few books.
- (98) \*We bought quite/not (a) several books.

Another kind of difference between *several* and *a few* is seen in:<sup>17</sup>

- (99) Only a few linguists have any interest in physics.

(100) \*Only several linguists have any interest in physics.

#### 5. *Several* and numerals

Rather than being especially close to *many* and *few*, *several* could be taken to have more in common with numerals (as in Borer (2005, 149, 240)). Like *several*, numerals do not allow comparatives or superlatives:

(101) \*fiver books; \*more five books

(102) \*the fivest books; \*the most five books

or degree words, as in:

(103) \*too/as/so/how five books

or (apart from *hundred*, *thousand*, etc.) an immediately preceding indefinite article:

(104) \*a five books

In addition, the following is interpreted like (94), rather than like (93):

(105) ?a great five books

The idea that *several* and numerals are more similar to each other than either is to *many* or *few* would also seem at first glance to be supported by their behavior with respect to *very*:<sup>18</sup>

(106) (not) very many books

(107) very few books

(108) only a very few books

vs.:

(109) \*very several books

(110) \*very five books

Similarly for certain adverbs when they express degree:

(111) unbelievably many books

(112) unbelievably few books

as opposed to:

(113) \*unbelievably several books

(114) \*unbelievably five books

In the same vein:

(115) ?fairly many people

(116) fairly few people

vs.:

(117) \*fairly several people

(118) \*fairly five people

as well as:

(119) ??pretty many people

(120) pretty few people

vs.:

(121) \*pretty several people

(122) \*pretty five people

#### 6. More on *every*

On the other hand, (24)/(26) with *every few days* is more natural than:

(123) ?They come by every several days.

This is, however, not a clear instance of *several* being closer to *few* than to numerals, given the possibility of:

(124) They come by every three days.

(125) The comet passes by every million years or so.

which must, by previous reasoning concerning (24)-(26), contain a singular noun. Furthermore that singular noun must be lacking in the impossible:<sup>19</sup>

(126) \*The comet passes by every millions of years.

Similarly for:

(127) For every three books you buy, you get one free.

(128) For every hundred (or so) books you buy, you get one free.

as opposed to:

(129) \*For every hundreds of books you buy, you get one free.

By previous reasoning, then, either *three* in (124) and (127) must be a singular noun itself or else (124) and (127) must contain singular NUMBER (or both), and similarly for *million/hundred* in (125) and (128).<sup>20</sup>

A similar paradigm holds for *a* in:

- (130) It will take you a good three years to write that book.
- (131) It will take that comet a good hundred (or so) years to reach us.
- (132) \*It will take that comet a good hundreds of years to reach us.

Again, (132) is sharply worse than the others because it lacks the singular noun called for by *a*.

A related contrast is given by:

- (133) They come by every two days.
- (134) They come by every other day.

In (133), *every* is licensed by the presence of a singular noun, either *two* or NUMBER. In (134), it must be singular *day* that is the licenser, on the reasonable assumption that *other* is an adjective rather than a noun.<sup>21</sup> We are consequently led to the correct expectation that *days* in (134) would (contrary to *days* in (133)) be incompatible with *every*:

- (135) \*They come by every other days.

In (133) the licenser for *every* (whether *two* or NUMBER) is closer to *every* than *days* is. Related to this is the fact that the presence of *every* is not sufficient to make singular *day* available:

- (136) \*They come by every two day.
- Every* in (133) cannot be replaced by *all*:<sup>22</sup>
- (137) \*They come by all two days.

Thinking of the earlier discussion of (38) and (56), this might be related to the contrast:

- (138) They come by once every three days.
- (139) \*They come by once all three days.

if (124) and (133) contain an unpronounced ONCE. These facts in turn recall:

- (140) One student from every department will be appointed to the committee.
- (141) One student from all (the) departments will be appointed to the committee.

in which *every* can scope over *one* more readily than *all* can.

That a distributive reading of this sort distinguishes *every* from *all* is also shown by the contrast between (127) and:<sup>23</sup>

- (142) \*For all three books you buy you get one free.

With what is arguably a non-distributive interpretation, *all* is possible in:

- (143) All three of the books were hard to read.

in which context *every* is not possible:

- (144) \*Every three of the books were/was hard to read.

as opposed to:

- (145) Every (single) one of the books was hard to read.

Whether (144) can be excluded by virtue of *every* there being in an insufficiently local relation with its potential licenser (*three* or NUMBER) is not clear.

By similar reasoning to the preceding, in (123) and in:

- (146) ?For every several books you buy you get one free.

either *several* must be a singular noun, or singular NUMBER must be present, or both.

Given the differences between *many* and *few*, on the one hand, and numerals and *several* on the other, as seen in (86)-(122), neither numerals nor *several* can plausibly be taken to be simple modifiers of NUMBER in the way that *many* and *few* are. (It might be that numerals are in a relation of apposition to NUMBER, in which case there would be a link to phrases like *the number three*.)

## 7. *Several* vs. numerals

Of course *several* differs from numerals in various ways, beginning with the fact that it does not occur in:<sup>24</sup>

- (147) \*the number several

or as an ordinal:

- (148) the seventh person
- (149) \*the severalth person

These two restrictions will turn out to be one if (148) (and other ordinals) are derived from a structure resembling:<sup>25</sup>

- (150) (the) -th person NUMBER seven

to which movement would apply, yielding:

- (151) (the) [NUMBER seven]<sub>i</sub> -th person t<sub>i</sub>

This would then be another instance of unpronounced NUMBER. (Given (150)/(151), the restriction seen in (149) reduces to that seen in (147).)

In addition, we have the contrast:

(152) seven and a half hours

(153) \*several and a half hours

as well as:<sup>26</sup>

(154) All seven of them were already there when I arrived.

(155) \*All several of them were already there when I arrived.

Similarly:

(156) The only seven books that are of any interest to me are...

(157) \*The only several books that are of any interest to me are...

and:

(158) You have exactly/precisely seven minutes left.

(159) \*You have exactly/precisely several minutes left.

It seems plausible to take the differences mentioned in (147)-(159) to reflect the fact that *several* is less precise than numerals. At the same time, as was shown necessary by (86)-(122), we need an analysis that keeps *several* distinct from *many* and *few*, which are also less precise than numerals.

#### 8. Possible analyses of *several*.

Let me use the following sharp contrast as a clue to the right kind of analysis. It involves expressions of age:<sup>27</sup>

(160) He's seven.

(161) \*He's several.

Again, a plausible intuition is that it is the imprecision of *several* that is at issue here. At the same time, an analysis too close to that of *many* and *few* is to be avoided. Since the imprecision of *many* and *few* has been expressed by relating them closely to *a large/big number* and *a little/small number*, the imprecision of *several* cannot be expressed in exactly the same way.

Numerals themselves can enter into expressions of imprecision through the addition of certain elements, as in:

(162) We've bought approximately fifteen books.

(163) We've bought about fifteen books.

(164) We've bought (somewhere) around fifteen books.<sup>28</sup>

However, these are appreciably less deviant than *several* is in (161):<sup>29</sup>

(165) (?)By next June, he'll be approximately/about seven.

(166) By next June, he'll be somewhere around seven.

The sharp minimal contrast with *several* is shown by:

(167) \*By next June, he'll be several.

It therefore doesn't seem as if *several* should be taken to be very close to any of the expressions of imprecision shown in (162)-(166).

A similar pattern holds for:

(168) (?)At the age of approximately/about seven, we...

(169) ?At the age of (somewhere) around seven, we...

as opposed to the very strong deviance of:

(170) \*At the age of several, we...

English has another way of expressing (a certain kind of) imprecision that matches the judgments concerning *several* somewhat more faithfully. What I have in mind are sentences like:<sup>30</sup>

(171) We must have bought a good fifteen books yesterday.

If we add *a good* to the contexts of (165)-(170), we get:

(172) ??By next June, he'll be a good seven.

(173) ??He must be a good seven by now.

and:

(174) \*At the age of a good seven, he...

The strong deviance of (170) is matched by that of (174); both are quite a bit less acceptable than (168) or (169). However, (172) and (173) do not seem as sharply unacceptable as (167).

#### 9. A more likely analysis for *several*

I think that a better match for (167) is:

(175) \*At the age of a small number,...

(176) \*By next June, he'll be a small number.

The key example is (176), which seems to me more starkly unacceptable than (172) or (173), and to clearly be closer in status to (167) than any of (165), (166), (172) or (173).<sup>31</sup>

However, *several* cannot plausibly be taken to be a direct counterpart of *a small number*, since I have already proposed earlier that *a few* is virtually that (apart from the distinction between *number* and *NUMBER*, and the distinction between *small* and *little* - cf. the discussion of (84)). In fact, *a few* behaves here as *a small number* (and as *several*):

(177) \*At the age of a few,...

(178) \*By next June, he'll be a few.

A way of expressing the parallelism between (175) and (178) and the corresponding facts with *several*, repeated here:

(179) \*At the age of several,...

(180) \*By next June, he'll be several.

all of which contrast sharply with numerals:

(181) At the age of seven,...

(182) By next June, he'll be seven.

is to take *several* to be like *a few* in involving *NUMBER* and in involving parallelism with *small/little*, yet to be different from *a few* in involving something extra.

What that extra something might be is suggested by Corver's (2005) observation (citing a similar point made by Jespersen (1924, 248) on 'weakened comparatives') that Dutch *meerdere* (as well as German *mehrere*), which translates as *several*, is nonetheless morphologically decomposable with the first morpheme (Dutch *meer-*, German *mehr-*) being the comparative morpheme corresponding to English *more*.<sup>32</sup>

My proposal, then, is that there is significant parallelism between the following two sentences:

(183) They know several linguists.

(184) They know more than a small number of linguists.

Taking *a few linguists* to be very close to *a small number of linguists*, as proposed earlier, leads to the expectation, if *several* is akin to *more than a small number*, that '*several* + N' is more than '*a few* + N'. This seems correct, to judge by:

(185) (?)John has written a few articles this year, but Mary has done even better - she's written several.<sup>33</sup>

(186) \*John has written several articles this year, but Mary has done even better - she's written a few.

This contrast feels like the following one (assuming in both pairs that writing more articles is to the good):

(187) John has written three articles this year, but Mary has done even better - she's written four.

(188) \*John has written four articles this year, but Mary has done even better - she's written three.

This judgment correlates with that of Payne & Huddleston (2002, 392%), who say that "the 'not multal' implicature conveyed by *a few* seems somewhat stronger than that conveyed by *several*. Thus a salesperson would be more likely to say that their product had several advantages over a competitor than that it had a few."

The significant parallelism between *several* and *more than a small number* (as opposed to numerals)<sup>34</sup> holds up straightforwardly across many of the phenomena mentioned earlier, for example, with expressions of age:

(189) At the age of seven/\*several/\*more than a small number,...

(190) By next year, he'll be seven/\*several/\*more than a small number.

and in combination with *a half*:

(191) seven and a half hours; \*several and a half hours; \*more than a small number and a half hours as well as with *all*:

(192) All seven/\*several/\*more than a small number of them were already there when I arrived.

Similarly with '*...only...any...*':

(193) The only seven books that are of any interest to me are...

(194) \*The only several books that are of any interest to me are...

(195) \*The only more than a small number of books that are of any interest to me are...

and with:

(196) You have exactly/precisely seven minutes left.

(197) \*You have exactly/precisely several minutes left.

(198) \*You have exactly/precisely more than a small number of minutes left.

Thinking back to ordinals at (148), we find:<sup>35</sup>

(199) the seventh person; \*the severalth person; \*the more than a small number-th person and the related:

(200) the number seven; \*the number several; \*the number more than a small number



We can note in passing that the overtly phrasal character of *more than a small number* in (199) and (200) is not sufficient to account for its incompatibility with *-th* and with *the number*, given:

(201) the five hundred and fifty-fourth person

(202) the number five hundred and fifty-four

Finally, we have:<sup>36</sup>

(203) seventeen/\*severalteen/\*more than a small number-teen

and:

(204) seventy/\*severalty/\*more than a small number-ty

10 Toward spelling out the analysis.

A way to spell out an analysis expressing the idea that *several* is very close to *more than a small number* is to take *several* in English to be a variant of *few* that is like *few* in necessarily modifying NUMBER (or *number*)<sup>37</sup> but unlike it in requiring the particular comparative context of:

(205) MORE THAN A several NUMBER...

From this perspective, we can think of *several people* as being particularly close to *more than a few people*. (By transitivity from the discussion of *small* vs. *little* at (84), *several* will now be closer to *little* than to *small*.) There are of course some questions that arise, for example:

(206) You have quite a few friends.

(207) \*You have quite several friends.

Why is (207) not possible as ‘MORE THAN quite A several friends’? Since the syntax of *quite* is not well understood,<sup>38</sup> let me transpose to a perhaps related question:

(208) You know far/way/a lot more than a few linguists.

(209) \*You know far/way/a lot several linguists.

Why can *far* or *way* or *a lot* not be added to (205) to yield (209)? A possible answer is that (205), while part of the correct analysis, is necessarily subject to a further movement operation that yields:<sup>39</sup>

(210) [A several NUMBER...]<sub>i</sub> MORE THAN t<sub>i</sub>

and that the landing site of such movement is not accessible if *far* or *way* or *a lot* is present.

Another type of question that arises can be illustrated with:<sup>40</sup>

(211) We bought a (?very) few books yesterday.

(212) We bought (\*very) several books yesterday.

Although modifying *a few* in this way is not entirely natural for me, it is clearly better than doing the same with *several*. Somewhat similarly with other modifiers:

(213) We bought a(n) ??unbelievably/\*?fairly/??pretty few books yesterday.

(214) \*We bought unbelievably/fairly/pretty several books yesterday.

With *very*, I find improvement with *only*:

(215) We bought only a very few books yesterday.

Assume that such modification with *a few* is possible only in the presence of *only* or its unpronounced counterpart ONLY. Then (212) might ultimately reduce to (209). If ONLY precedes MORE and occupies the same position as *far/way/a lot*, then the reduction is direct. If ONLY is as in:

(216) We bought more than only a few books yesterday.

it still might block movement of ‘[A several NUMBER...]’.

Related to this, I think, is the fact that *several* and *more than a few* differ with respect to:

(217) New York City has more than a few inhabitants.

(218) New York City has more than several inhabitants.

The first of these is more natural, though perhaps even better is:

(219) New York City has more than just a few inhabitants.

If (217) requires an unpronounced JUST, then this difference in naturalness may reduce to the previous discussion concerning ONLY.

More immediate is an understanding of why *several* has no comparative or superlative forms and why it is incompatible with degree words like *too*, *so*, etc. - see (86)-(90). If *several* is strongly parallel to *more than a few*, then the answer is in part that one can’t have:

(220) \*We’ve made too/so/as/how more than a few mistakes.

and in part that one can’t have:

(221) \*We’ve made more than a too/so/as/how few mistakes.

## 11 Conclusion.

*Several*, *few*, and *many* have in common that they are modifiers of unpronounced NUMBER (and sometimes *number*), closely related to modifiers like *little* (in the case of *several* and *few*) and *large* (in the case of *many*). *Several* is more complex than *many* and *few* in necessarily entering into a larger comparative structure.

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\* This paper corresponds closely to part of a talk presented at the Linguistic Perspectives on Numerical Expressions conference held at the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics - OTS in June 2004.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kayne (2002; 2005a (originally circulated in 2002); 2005b).

<sup>2</sup> There is also a contrast for me between (15)/(16) and:

- (i) \*John bought too many a number of houses to qualify for assistance.
- (ii) \*John has the most number of houses of anybody I know.

(On the other hand, I have heard a sentence like (ii) - cf. perhaps the acceptability of *for the most part*.)

<sup>3</sup> For recent discussion, see Zweig (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Note, for example, that (25) remains impossible even with singular *day*:

- i) \*They come by every many a day.

<sup>5</sup> French has:

- i) Ils passent une fois par an. ('...one time per year')

which is more usual than ii) is in English:

- ii) They come by once per year.

(French has no form that corresponds exactly to *once* or *twice*.) French disallows a word-for-word counterpart of (36):

- iii) \*Ils passent une fois un an. ('...one time a year')

<sup>6</sup> Counterparts of *every* and *a* cooccur overtly in Kurdish - see Abdulla and McCarus (1967, 36, 51, 145); see also Beghelli and Stowell (1997, 101) on the indefiniteness of *every*. Relevant, too, is the fact that, although Italian *ciasc-* is more like *each* than like *every*, it cooccurs with *un*:

- i) *ciascun libro* ('each-a book')

On the relation between *every* and *each*, see Jayaseelan (2005).

<sup>7</sup> On the movement of *as big*, see Hendrick (1990). A potential problem for the parallelism in question is:

- i) \*You bought as big one house as we did.

Independently of the potential link to *as big*, the contrast:

- ii) Once in a (great) while, they come to visit us.
- iii) \*Twice in a (great) while, they come to visit us.

and its similarity to *every once/\*twice in a while* suggests that (ii) is:

- iv) EVERY once in a (great) while,...

with unpronounced EVERY.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Zweig (2005).

Yet to be understood is:

- i) Do it just this once!
- ii) \*Do it just this/these twice!

though I find a similar (though weaker) difference with overt *time*:

- iii) Do it just this one time!
- iv) ?Do it just these two times!

<sup>9</sup> The impossibility of:

- i) \*They come by every so frequent.

must mean that *frequent* cannot modify NUMBER - cf.:

- ii) \*They've been here on a frequent number of occasions.
- iii) \*Frequenttimes, they arrive late.

<sup>10</sup> This differs from Zamparelli (%), who suggests a different unpronounced noun - his (partly similar) proposal does not appear to account for (125) or (129). Another interesting alternative is suggested by Jayaseelan (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Also, French uses neither in:

- i) What time is it?
- ii) *Quelle heure est-il?* ('which hour is it')

<sup>12</sup> The following contrast (bearing on Jayaseelan (2005)) remains to be understood:

- i) They come by once every three years.
- ii) ??They come by once each three years.

French arguably lacks a direct counterpart of *every*. It's counterpart of *each* (*chaque*) can be used here to some extent - Grevisse (1993, §611). The normal French counterpart of *every three years* is:

- iii) tous les trois ans ('*tous* the three years')

which is not possible in English with *all*:

- iv) \*They come by all (the) three years.

Nor is:

- v) \*They come by every the three years.

Possibly, (iii) contains singular *tout* rather than plural *tous*.

<sup>13</sup> Impossible is:

- i) \*They come by every a couple of days.

like:

- ii) The comet appears (once) every (\*a) thousand years.

and perhaps like:

- iii) We just bought three more (\*a) hundred drawer file cabinets.
- iv) They cut down two more (\*a) hundred-year-old trees.

<sup>14</sup> It remains to be understood why (i) is impossible:

- i) \*You've only written a tiny few articles this year.

<sup>15</sup> Note though that *a few* is not compatible with degree modifiers:

- i) \*a too/as/so/how few books
- ii) \*too/as/so/how a few books

A link between *a few* and *several* will be drawn later.

<sup>16</sup> As noted in Payne and Huddleston (2002, 392).

<sup>17</sup> Payne and Huddleston (2002, 392) say that *only* is "hardly idiomatic" with *several*. Cf. the fact that (100) improves somewhat without *any*:

- i) ??Only several linguists came to the party.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. also the emphatic:

- i) They have many, many faults.
- ii) ???They have few, few faults.
- iii) \*They have several, several faults.

Below, (iii) will turn out to be related to:

- iv) \*They have more than a few, more than a few faults.

<sup>19</sup> Strictly speaking, there could perhaps be a singular noun in the structure, as long as it was not accessible to *every*:

- i) \*We admire every pictures of a cat that we've ever seen.
- ii) \*We admire every cat lovers we meet.

<sup>20</sup> For interesting discussion, see Zweig (2005).

<sup>21</sup> Even, I think, in sentences like:

- i) The others look better.

as suggested in Kayne (2003, section 4).

<sup>22</sup> It is not the case that *all* and *two* are systematically incompatible:

- i) He's bringing his friends. Sure, all two of them!

23 Despite *all* appearing to enter into a distributive reading in:

- i) All the students have cars.

24 An incorporation type of approach to the verb *number* may allow relating to (147) the following:

- i) ?Next year our incoming students are expected to number seven/\*several.

Why (ii) is better remains to be understood:

- ii) ?Last year's incoming students were several in number.

25 When ordinals occur in fractions:

- i) four fifths (of a pound)

there is very likely:

- ii) four fifth PART s

with an unpronounced noun comparable to *part*.

26 Cf.:

- i) For some reason, they invited the seven/\*several of us together.

27 Similar to (160) vs. (161) (and fitting in with the analysis to be proposed) are the following contrasts between numerals and *several*:

- i) They have a seven-year-old to take care of.
- ii) \*They have a several-year-old to take care of.

and:

- iii) At the age of seven, you...
- iv) \*At the age of several, you...

as well as:

- v) That football team will kick two more seven-yard/\*several-yard field goals.
- vi) the seven/\*several of spades

28 Note the contrast with:

- i) \*We've bought someplace around fifteen books.  
Of interest, too, is:
- ii) We were there something like 10 days.
- iii) \*We were there something.

which suggests that in (ii) 'something like 10' is a constituent, in the spirit of Corver and Zwarts (2004).

29 Like (165) and (166) are:

- i) By next June, he'll be seven or so
- ii) (?)By next June, he'll be sevenish.

Also:

- iii) At the age of seven or so, he...
- iv) ??At the age of fifteenish, John....

On *-ish*, note:

- v) ?We spent two-ish hours on that problem.
- vi) \*?We spent one-ish hours...
- vii) \*We spent one-ish hour...
- viii) \*\*We spent an-ish hour(s)...

Cf.:

- ix) \*John's book numbers one
- x) ?J's books number just one

30 On this *good*, cf. also Kayne (2005a, section 7). On the perhaps related *a meager two hours*, cf. Ionin and Matushansky (2005).

The *good* in question may be an adjectival (or perhaps nominal) variant of the *well* of:

- i) We go there on weekdays as well on weekends.
- ii) John is well over 40.

Both this *good* and this *well* appear to be positive polarity items, and both reject modification (with *very*, with *quite*, and with *unbelievably*). There may also be a link to the *well* of:

iii) You may well be right.

despite its allowing *very*.

It remains to be understood why the following is very marginal:

iv) \*?They come by (once) every good seven days.

<sup>31</sup> Or the non-standard:

i) He ain't no eighteen.

again in the sense of age. This non-standard use of *no* is that of:

ii) He ain't written no twenty books.

which may be related to the standard (for me, non-colloquial, with stress on the numeral):

iii) He's written some twenty books.

although (iv) doesn't seem possible to me, for reasons to be determined:

iv) \*He must be some twenty.

<sup>32</sup> Similarly for French *plusieurs* with initial *plus-*, as Jespersen noted in discussing late Latin *pluriores*. Jespersen and Corver further take these forms to include a (doubling) comparative suffix (*-er* in Dutch and German, akin to English *-er*) whose relevance to *several* I will leave open.

<sup>33</sup> Note that *various* does not work here:

i) \*John has written a few articles this year, but Mary has done even better - she's written various (ones/articles).

Arguably, *various* does not involve NUMBER at all, as suggested also by:

ii) This cake needed several/\*various more ounces of chocolate.

iii) That sculpture is several/\*various meters tall.

and similarly for *a variety of*.

<sup>34</sup> The French counterpart of *several* differs from numerals in not allowing *ans* (as opposed to *années*) for *years*:

i) Elle a passé trois/\*plusieurs ans à étudier la linguistique. ('she has spent three/several years to study the linguistics')

though it has in common with numerals non-occurrence with *de* (apart from right-dislocation):

ii) Elle a plusieurs (\*de) soeurs. ('she has several (of) sisters')

<sup>35</sup> Probably related to (199) and (200) is:

i) Our problems have increased by a factor of seven/\*several/\*more than a small number.

Why *several* is in contrast possible in (ii) remains to be elucidated:

ii) Our problems have increased severalfold.

<sup>36</sup> Note that *\*severalteen* contrasts with *umpteen* (though there's no *\*umpty*), presumably because *ump-* is simplex.

<sup>37</sup> Recall that *few* occurs with overt *number* in limited cases - v. (15) and (16). However *a few* does not cooccur with *number*, so that on the text analysis we would not expect *several* to:

i) \*They know a few number linguists.

ii) \*They know several number linguists.

<sup>38</sup> Note, however, that (207) recalls:

i) \*You have quite many friends.

Also:

ii) \*You have a quite few friends.

<sup>39</sup> Perhaps this movement would be blocked by overt *a*. If so, we would have an account for:

i) \*a several friends

as opposed to *a few*.

There is also a question concerning (146), repeated here:

(ii) ?For every several books you buy you get one free.  
since it contrasts with:

(iii) \*For every more than a few books you buy you get one free.

<sup>40</sup> Although *a little* is a close mass noun counterpart of *a few*, there seems to be no mass noun counterpart for *several*. There might be a link here to:

i) You have a good/great many friends.

ii) \*You have a good/great much money.

and/or to:

iii) You have numerous friends.

iv) \*You have amountous money.

and/or to:

v) Your friends number in the hundreds.

vi) \*Your money amounts in the tons.

