

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Numbers as Evaluative Devices: An Exploratory Study of Semantic Prosody in Kuwaiti Spoken Arabic**Sheikha Al-Dosari¹ ✉ and Mohammed Nofal²**¹ Lecturer, Faculty of Language Studies, Arab Open University, Kuwait² Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Faculty of Language Studies, Arab Open University, Kuwait**Corresponding Author:** Sheikha Al-Dosari, **E-mail:** sheikha@aou.edu.kw

ABSTRACT

This article explores the semantic prosody of numerical expressions in an under-researched context, Kuwaiti Spoken Arabic (KA). A corpus of 547 elicited utterances was compiled through the Mentimeter online platform. Participants were asked to write sentences in which they use numbers as they would in their daily lives. After formalising the spelling variation in the data following Nofal (2023), the data were analysed qualitatively, based on the frameworks of semantic prosody and semantic preference. The data were coded independently by both authors and then discussed together for divergent cases to arrive at a final classification. The three numerals that were most frequently used for evaluation were identified through frequency analysis: 1000/ألف (thousand), 100/مئة (hundred), and 1000000/مليون (million). The construction [numeral + مرة] became the most frequent means of negative prosody, appearing with each of the three main numerals in about 63-66% of the utterances in which they occurred. The prosodic polarity analysis shows a consistent pattern: ألف has the widest pragmatic range, with a negative profile in the context of complaint and repeated instruction, and a fairly strong positive profile in conventionalised felicitations formulae; مليون and مئة have predominantly neutral-to-negative profiles, with positive uses mostly restricted to greeting and affection expressions. The study shows that large round numbers in KA are evaluative intensifiers and not exact quantifiers, and that the prosodic direction is determined by the collocational environment rather than the numeral itself.

KEYWORDS

Corpus pragmatics, evaluative language, Kuwaiti Arabic, numerical expressions, semantic prosody

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Semantic prosody research has produced a rich body of knowledge about how words acquire evaluative colouring through collocational habit. Yet, research on semantic prosody rests overwhelmingly on English. Applications to languages other than English remain uneven. For example, Chinese has received acute attention (Xiao and McEnery 2006), and a small number of studies have examined prosodic patterns in Arabic political and religious discourse (e.g. Alshahrano 2020; Alhusaiyan 2023; Sayaaheen and Malkawi 2019). Informal spoken varieties of Arabic, and Gulf Arabic in particular, have been glossed over in the study of semantic prosody. In addition, research on socio-pragmatics and semantic prosody has focused on lexical items such as nouns and verbs. Yet, numbers have received little or no attention in this regard. To this end, the present study addresses these issues by focusing on numerical expressions in one of the Arabic varieties, Kuwaiti Spoken Arabic (KA).

An utterance like 'قاعد انتظرك من مئة سنة' (literally, "I have been waiting for you for a hundred years.") shows how a speaker flouts Grice's maxim of quality to highlight a certain meaning. Such a flout is achieved by using the numeral 'مئة' (a hundred) does not refer to a century. Instead, it is communicating impatience, or the exasperation of someone kept waiting without acknowledgement. In so doing, the number has become an evaluative device as its quantitative content is suspended in favour of an attitudinal one. Whether this kind of suspension is idiosyncratic or patterned, whether it clusters around particular numerals, and whether prosodic value is a property of the numeral itself or of the grammatical construction it enters are empirical questions that this study sets out to answer.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to establish the frequency distribution of numerical expressions across a corpus of 547 elicited KA utterances and to identify which items occur frequently enough to create collocational patterns. This study also examines the collocational profiles of the most frequent numerals to determine the evaluative loading of these numerals. To operationalise these objectives, the current study is guided by the following research questions:

What is the frequency distribution of numerical expressions in the corpus, and which items are dominant?

What collocational environments characterise the most frequent numerals, and what evaluative direction do those environments supply?

This article argues that prosodic direction in KA numerical expressions is a property of construction rather than of the individual numeral. In other words, the evaluative load of numerical expressions, whether positive or negative, is triggered by the prosodic environment (the structure of the utterance in which the number is used) rather than the number itself.

While this study illuminates our understanding of behaviour and pragmatic meanings of numeral expressions, it has some limitations that should not be seen as a deficit but as a threshold that opens doors for future research. First, the data are elicited rather than spontaneous. Our participants were requested to produce sentences using numbers as they would in everyday speech. Whilst the submissions closely resemble informal digital messaging in their register and pragmatic character, they are not naturally occurring interactional data. Thus, prosodic profiles from elicited data may not capture the full distributional range of expressions that would emerge from a larger spontaneous corpus. In addition, the data do not include demographic information. While this preserves anonymity, it prevents any analysis of prosodic variation by age, gender, or social group, which is a recognised limitation given the sociolinguistic complexity of Arabic dialectology (Al-Wer and De Jong 2009), but opens up door for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Semantic prosody

The concept of semantic prosody developed from Sinclair's (1991) observation that "many uses of words and phrases show a tendency to occur in a certain semantic environment" (Sinclair 1991: 112). Such observation offered the empirical foundation for the treatment of evaluative meaning as a property of patterns of co-occurrence rather than of individual words. Later, Louw (1993) coined and defined the term semantic prosody as "[a] consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates". That is, the word's collocational environment triggers the consistent evaluative aura and contributes to attaching this evaluation to a certain form even when the evaluating co-text is missing. To illustrate this idea, Louw (1993:160) used the English adverb 'utterly' as an example, claiming that it combines with many negative collocates and has "few 'good' collocates". So, the adverb assumes a negative load even in the absence of its negative collocates. Stubbs (2009, 2013) further distinguished between semantic prosody (i.e. evaluative) and semantic preference (i.e. the semantic type of frequent collocates). That is, a word may have a strong preference for animate collocates while simultaneously exhibiting negative prosody, and the two dimensions must be described separately.

Despite this, the term semantic prosody was contested by scholars such as Stewart (2010) and Whitsitt (2005). Yet, Stubbs (2013, 25) pointed out that semantic prosody should be discussed as one obligatory parameter of the extended-unit-of-meaning model, which was outlined by Sinclair (1996) and further developed by Stubbs (2013). The extended-unit-of-meaning model operates with four structural categories, including collocation, colligation, semantic preference, and semantic prosody. To illustrate, Ebeling (2014, 164) used the English verb 'commit' showing these parameters:

(Core: commit)	
Collocation	commit (the/a/an/Ø) murder/suicide, etc.
Colligation	Commit NP
Semantic preference	word or phrase to do with an unpleasant event
Semantic prosody	bad/negative

2.2 Hyperbole, round numbers, and evaluative quantity

In addition to the literature on the semantic prosody of numbers, there is a literature on what numbers do when they are not counting. Kao et al. (2014) showed that listeners regularly process large numbers non-literally, and that they use this non-literal processing to infer the speaker's affective stance from the implausible number. Their model showed that hyperbole in numerical language is "interpreting unlikely numbers as exaggerated and conveying affect" (Kao et al. 2014), and that this is not a marginal or failure case, but a regular and predictable pathway in number comprehension. Jansen and Janssen (2001) demonstrated, independently, that the distribution of numbers in text is "highly dependent on two factors: magnitude and roundness" (Jansen and Janssen 2001) by analysing the number frequencies in Dutch, English, German and French corpora. Round numbers, especially multiples of ten, are over-represented and this over-representation is correlated with their frequent use in contexts where they are not being used to quantify precisely.

Carston and Wearing (2015), examining hyperbole from a relevance-theoretic perspective, characterised it as "the blatant exaggeration of a relevant scalar property for the purpose of expressing an evaluation of a state of affairs" (Carston and Wearing 2015). The word "blatant" is doing analytical work here: the speaker communicates that the number is not to be taken literally, and this signals that the speaker's evaluation of the situation is strong enough to require scalar excess to express it. Mora (2009), working from corpus data in the British National Corpus, found that hyperbolic expressions show "a remarkable preference for negative affect, auxesis and absolute terms" (Mora 2009). The preference for negative affect in hyperbole is not absolute, but it is a strong distributional tendency. The present corpus data confirm it for KA numerical hyperbole, with modifications that reflect the cultural specificity of certain positive numerical formulae in Arabic.

Jucker et al. (2003), in their relevance-theoretic account of vague language in conversation, noted that numerical vagueness in characterising quantities "may convey the speaker's attitude about the quantity itself" alongside informational content. This is the dual function, quantity and attitude, expressed at the same time, that makes large round numbers analytically productive from a prosodic point of view. The numeral does not just indicate a number; it shades the speech in an evaluative way, and the shade is provided by the context of the construction.

2.3 Evaluative language in Arabic: Corpus evidence and sociolinguistic context

The study of evaluative language in Arabic has grown significantly in recent years, with a significant increase in the number of studies on the subject, but informal spoken Gulf varieties are still underrepresented.

Sayaheen and Malkawi (2019), in a study of semantic prosody in Arabic political discourse, demonstrated that corpus-driven methods can be applied productively to Arabic data and that prosodic patterns are detectable through collocational analysis of Arabic texts. Their findings confirmed both the cross-linguistic applicability of the semantic prosody framework and the fact that Arabic evaluative language is organised around consistent collocational patterns. That is the foundational assumption of the present analysis.

Informal digital messaging in KA has attracted sociolinguistic attention, though corpus-pragmatic work on this register remains scarce. Akbar (2018), working with WhatsApp data from young Kuwaiti speakers, documented the linguistic features of informal digital KA, showing that this register is characterised by code-switching, phoneme shifts specific to the Kuwaiti dialect, and extensive use of extralinguistic features. The relevance of that work here is partly methodological: it confirms that informal digital KA constitutes a legitimate and describable object of linguistic study, not a degraded or inconsistent approximation of spoken Arabic.

Al-Wer and De Jong (2009) document considerable internal variation in Gulf Arabic across the varieties spoken in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE. Findings from one Gulf variety cannot be extended to others without separate empirical investigation, and the present study makes no such claim. The prosodic profiles described here are specific to KA as represented in this corpus.

2.4 The pragmatics of numerical scale

Why do large numbers function as evaluative devices at all? The answer, at least in part, lies in the inferential architecture of quantity communication. When a speaker asserts a quantity that cannot plausibly be taken literally, the hearer is licensed to abandon the literal reading and pursue a non-literal interpretation. Kao et al. (2014) formalised this as a social inference about communicative goal: the hearer infers that the speaker's aim is to convey affect rather than to count, and this inference is generated rapidly and reliably. Jansen and Janssen (2001) demonstrated that large round numbers, precisely because of their ubiquity in approximate and evaluative contexts, have a pragmatic profile that is inextricable from their use as scalar amplifiers. A thousand or a million is a round number that comes in an utterance after a string of non-literal uses, and that string of uses is part of what the hearer brings to the interpretation.

In the present corpus, this is the case for the choice of million over ألف or of ألف over مية. The larger the numeral, the more intense the evaluative. The speaker who says دقيت عليك مليون مرة is not just making a stronger quantitative claim than the speaker who says دقيت عليك ألف مرة, but is tuning his expressed exasperation. This calibration is possible because the numerals are located at different points on a scalar evaluative system whose pragmatic weights are determined by the frequency with which each numeral has historically been used in non-literal intensifying contexts.

That is a cross-linguistically real but not uniform scalar system. Xiao and McEnery (2006) demonstrated that the prosodic profiles of near-synonymous quantity expressions in Chinese and English are different, and that this difference is not due to universal numerical semantics, but rather to community-specific collocational histories. The same applies here: the prosodic properties of ألف in KA are not predictable from the behaviour of "a thousand" in English, as its history of use in Gulf Arabic felicitational formulae, blessing registers, and complaint constructions is different from that of English. Comparative work is still to be done. The present study is a first step towards the empirical description that any such comparison would require.

3. Methodology

The data were not subjected to any a priori theoretical hypotheses about specific numerals or prosodic categories. Patterns of co-text and evaluative association were allowed to emerge from systematic, iterative engagement with the submissions. The analytical framework is based on the concepts of semantic prosody and semantic preference as proposed by Stubbs (2001) and Hunston (2002). Throughout, quantitative frequency counts are used as well as qualitative close reading, the latter providing the interpretive content that frequency data cannot provide.

Data were gathered through a sentence production elicitation task on Mentimeter, an online interactive presentation and data collection platform. Participants were asked to submit sentences in which they use numbers as they do in their everyday spoken Arabic. The prompt was intentionally vague, with no examples given, no specific numerical values suggested, and no pragmatic context provided. This openness was selected to allow language to be presented that reflects the communicative repertoire of the participants, including the collocational habits and evaluative associations that are the object of analysis, rather than metalinguistic reflection or grammaticality judgements.

The distribution was done through a QR code that was projected to the participants. This mode of access was selected to gain access to speakers in a natural group setting and to capture the mobile-first communicative practices of this population, as the majority of informal KA production among adult Kuwaiti speakers takes place on handheld devices. The answers were collected directly from the Mentimeter platform and downloaded to one data file.

The raw submissions were normalised prior to analysis to ensure consistency throughout the data set. Two types of variation were dealt with. First, the same number was used in the corpus in several different graphic representations: 1000, ألف, 1000000, مليون, and 100, مئة, مية. These were treated as synonymous in all subsequent analytical procedures because there is no evidence in the co-text that the choice of Arabic lexical forms and Hindi-Arabic numeral script has any semantic or evaluative significance in this register. Second, the orthographic variation of lexical items, which is a typical feature of informal digital Arabic in which the standardised spelling conventions are not always followed, was regularised when the intended form was unambiguous. Responses that were too short to allow for prosodic coding (usually a single word response with no recoverable context) were included in the frequency count but not in the prosodic polarity analysis. After cleaning, the dataset comprises 547 utterances.

Before answering, participants were given a short description of the purpose of the study. Voluntary completion of the task constituted informed consent, in line with ethical guidelines for low-risk linguistic research involving adult participants from whom no personally identifiable data are collected and to whom no deception or risk of harm is applied. No demographic data, such as age, gender, education or region in Kuwait, was gathered at any point. This maintains anonymity but restricts the scope of social variation that can be explored across subgroups, as discussed in Section 6. The participants were all self-identified Kuwaiti Arabic speakers.

After cleaning, the dataset comprises 547 utterances following Nofal (2023). Utterance length varies from single-clause submissions of three to five words to multi-clause turns of the kind characteristic of informal mobile messaging in Arabic. All submissions are written in Arabic script using the orthographic conventions typical of informal digital KA: vocalisation diacritics are largely absent, word boundaries are handled with varying consistency, and both Arabic lexical numeral forms (ألف, مئة, مليون) and Arabic numeral script (1000, 100, 1000000) appear in free variation. These form pairs are treated as equivalent throughout the analysis. The full dataset forms the basis of the frequency analysis in Section 4.1 followed by the prosodic polarity analysis in Section 4.2 and the qualitative close reading in Sections 4.3 through 4.7.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first stage, the full dataset was scanned for numerical expressions, and each utterance was assigned to one of four functional categories on the basis of its co-text and pragmatic frame: repetition and frequency, hyperbole and intensification, time and duration, and other numeric reference. These categories were developed inductively from the data rather than imposed in advance; they emerged through repeated reading of the full corpus and were refined as additional examples qualified or complicated initial distinctions.

Prosodic polarity coding formed the second stage. Each utterance in the repetition and frequency, hyperbole and intensification, and time and duration categories was assigned one of three labels: negative (co-text of complaint, frustration, reproach, or dissatisfaction), positive (co-text of compliment, warmth, blessing, or gratitude), or mixed/neutral (no clear evaluative direction, or informational function without consistent prosodic loading). The other numeric reference category was examined separately, since it contains both referentially literal uses and a small set of culturally fixed expressions whose evaluative meaning does not derive from prosodic accumulation in the corpus-linguistic sense.

Both stages of coding were carried out independently by the two authors. After independent analysis, the two sets of codes were compared, and differences were discussed until consensus was reached on each disputed case. This procedure was applied across the full dataset rather than to a sample, which means the inter-analyst comparison served as an ongoing check on the consistency of category definitions rather than a post-hoc reliability measure.

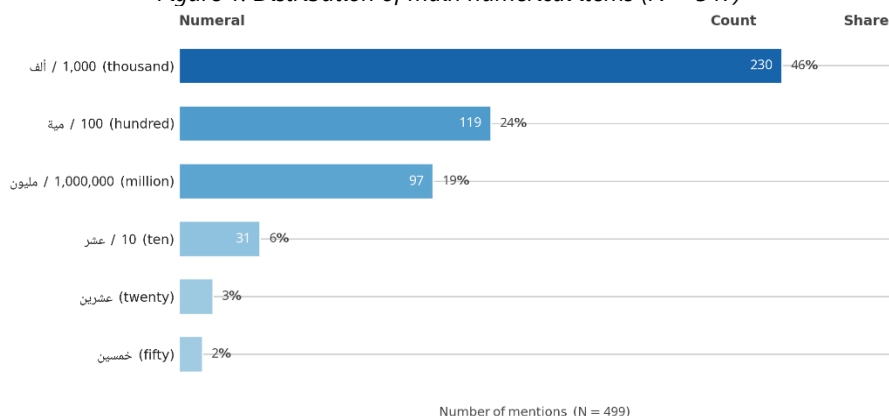
All examples presented in the analysis are accompanied by two translations: a literal translation, preserving the grammatical structure of the source, and a communicative translation, rendering the pragmatic meaning in natural British English. Where the gap between them is substantial, that gap is itself treated as analytically significant.

4. Findings

4.1 Frequency distribution and functional classification

Utterances distribute very unevenly across numerals in this corpus. Figure 1 presents the frequency of the main numerical items, combining Arabic lexical forms with their Hindi-Arabic numeral equivalents.

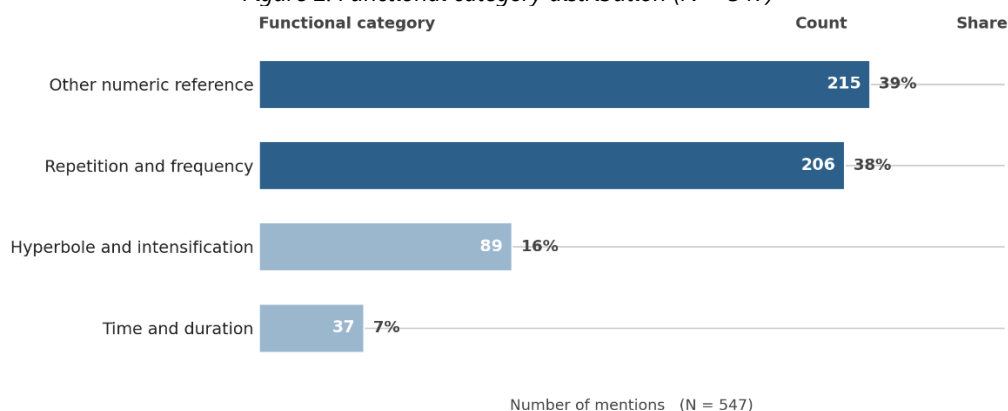
Figure 1. Distribution of main numerical items (N = 547)



ألف appears in 42% of all utterances. ألف is a much smaller number than مليون on any literal reading, yet it occurs nearly twice as frequently. This asymmetry is consistent with the view that ألف has undergone a degree of pragmatic grammaticalisation in KA, its quantitative content bleached in favour of a stable evaluative function. مليون and مئة occupy the next two positions, and together with ألف they account for 82% of the corpus. Lower-frequency items, عشر, عشرين, and خمسين, appear in evaluative contexts, but the data are insufficient for robust collocational profiling; observations about these items are therefore treated as preliminary.

Classifying all 547 utterances across the four analytical categories yields the distribution shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Functional category distribution (N = 547)

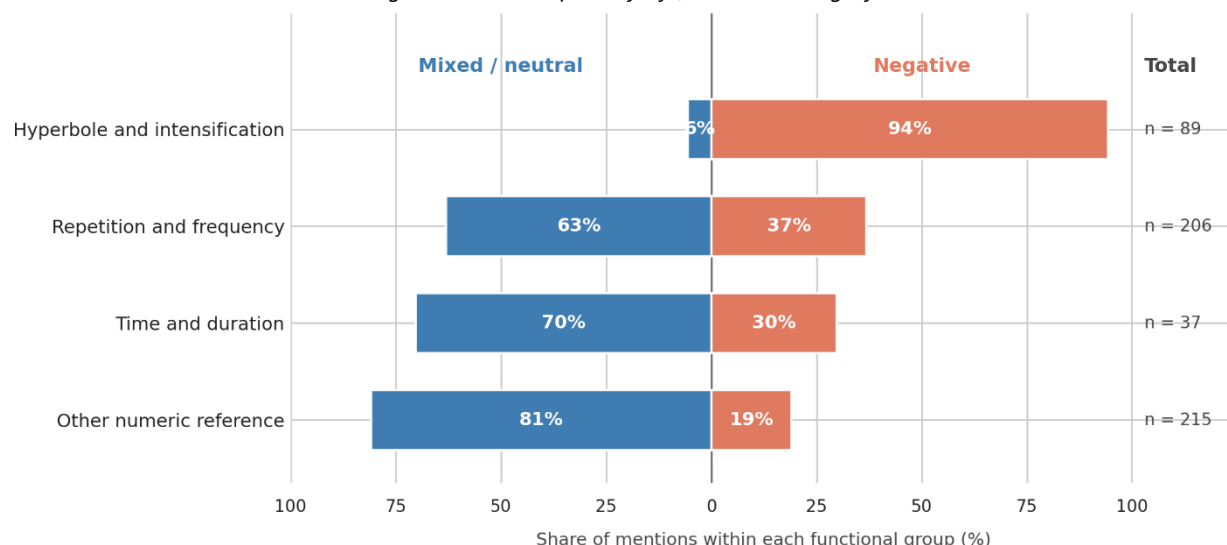


Taken as a set, the evaluative categories (repetition and frequency, hyperbole and intensification, and time and duration) account for 61% of the corpus, while other numeric reference, which includes literal uses and culturally fixed expressions, accounts for the remaining 39%. The distribution confirms that the dataset is predominantly interactional rather than informational in character, which is consistent with the elicitation design and with Palfreyman and Al Khalil's (2003) observation that informal Gulf Arabic in digital contexts retains the evaluative and affective character of face-to-face speech.

4.2 Prosodic polarity analysis

Figure 3 outlines the polarity of each functional category, contrasting negative prosody (co-text in which the complaint, frustration, reproach or exasperation intent is expressed) with mixed or neutral prosody (co-text in which no evaluative direction predominates or where the surrounding language is positive, such as in compliments, blessings or expressions of thanks).

Figure 3. Prosodic polarity by functional category



As shown in Figure 3, the Hyperbole and intensification category is negative. The environments of complaints, reproach or exasperation (84, 94%) are much more prevalent than mixed or neutral (5, 6%) in this group of 89 instances. But these five exceptions are not arbitrary: They are cases where the same hyperbolic pattern is found in a compliment or blessing, indicating that the negative alignment is strong but not absolute. These are covered in detail in Section 4.4.

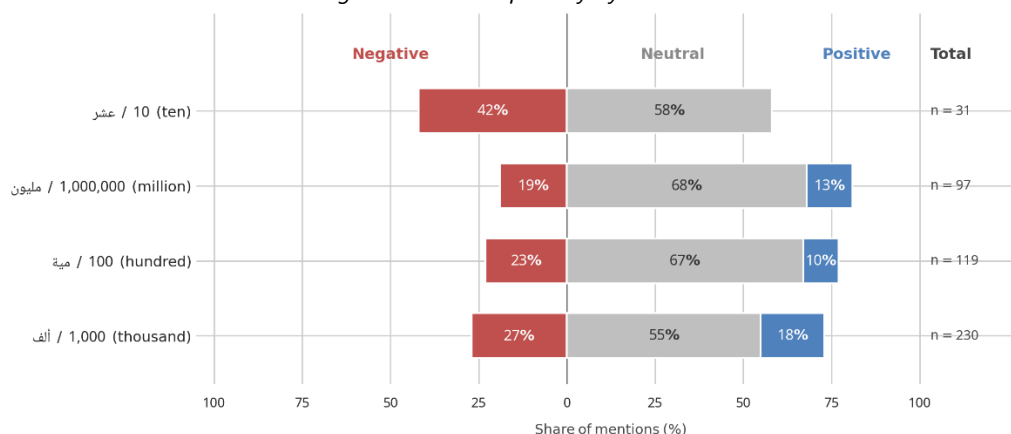
In contrast the Repetition and frequency category is quite different. In this case, the distribution of the 206 cases is less polarised: 130 (63%) are mixed or neutral, and 76 (37%) have negative prosody. This is not a close division, as one might think, but rather a definite – although not extreme – preference for mixed or neutral usage. The numbers qualifying repetition are thus not only highly exaggerative, but also appear to be more flexible than the intensifiers in the hyperbolic sense. They are seen in literal complaint frames and also in simple factual descriptions of reoccurring actions. It is not the function of marking a frequency, but rather the evaluative nature of the co-text surrounding them that determines their prosodic colouring.

The other categories share a similar sentiment. Mixed/neutral time/duration: 26 of 37 (70%) instances, 11 of which are negative (30%). Other numeric reference, 81% (174 of 215) are mixed or neutral, while 19% (41 instances) are negative. Figure 3 suggests that as a class, numerals do not have semantic prosody. It depends on the praxis it serves, but most of all on the assessment company it keeps.

All in all, the prosodic colouring of numerals appears to be functional rather than fixed, as suggested in Figure 3. Hyperbole and intensification are very striking: 84 of 89 cases are negative (94%), and only five are mixed or neutral. In contrast, repetition and frequency are far less negative (-76/206 or 37%) and are mostly mixed or neutral (130 or 63%). Time and duration are similar, with 26 mixed or neutral and 11 negative (70% mixed or neutral, 30% negative). Other numeric reference is more neutral: 174 (81%) mixed or neutral; 41 (19%) negative. Negativity is focussed in hyperbolic usage, and the other usage is largely non-negative. There are two cautions: 1) mixed/neutral combines mixed, neutral and positive cases, and 2) the time/duration total is small (37).

To look at the data more closely, we examined the prosodic polarity of the most common numerical expressions in the corpus. Figure 4 presents polarity by individual numeral for the four most frequent items, which are (thousand) ألف / ١٠٠٠, (hundred) مئة / ١٠٠, (million) مليون / ١,٠٠٠,٠٠٠, and (ten) عشر / ١٠.

Figure 4. Prosodic polarity by numeral



As shown in Figure 4, the targeted expressions were mostly neutral, with (million) ١٠٠٠٠٠٠ / مليون having the highest neutral polarity (68%) and (thousand) ١٠٠٠ / ألف with the least polarity (55%).

Remarkably, ألف shows the most complex prosodic profile as it registers the highest positive percentage (18%) of any item, more than double the figure for مية (10%). This reflects its participation in conventionalised felicitation formulae (عافية ألف، مبروك ألف) alongside its dominant negative profile in complaint and repeated-instruction frames. Another interesting insight is that عشر shows the highest negative loading (42%) and no positive uses at all in the data.

When we looked at the collocates, we found that the collocate مرة co-occurs with 63% of ألف utterances, 64% of مليون utterances, and 66% of مية utterances. The corpus thus suggests that the [numeral + مرة] construction is the primary vehicle for negative prosodic loading across all three main items as will be shown in the following subsections.

4.3 Hyperbole and intensification: Negative prosody

All 80 instances in the hyperbole and intensification category share a structural and functional core that is consistent across the corpus. The prototypical frame is [LARGE ROUND NUMBER + مره "time(s)"] followed by or accompanied by a verb of directed communication (calling, saying, messaging, telling) and, in the great majority of cases, either an explicit statement of non-response or an implied negative outcome. This frame is so consistent and so frequently attested that it appears to be approaching the status of a grammaticalised complaint device in KA.

Example 1

وينك يا حبيبي قاعد ادق عليك مليون مره ما ترد شسالفه

Literal: Where are you, my dear? I am calling you a million times and you are not answering. What is the matter?

Communicative: Where are you? I've been trying to reach you non-stop and you're not picking up. What's going on?

Analysis: The collocational structure here is [you don't answer" + مليون + مره + ما ترد], the canonical complaint frame. The address term حبيبي "my dear" introduces an affective softener, but the complaint logic is unambiguous: the speaker's many unsuccessful attempts at contact are foregrounded, and the follow-up question شسالفه "what's the matter?" presses the addressee for an account. مليون here carries a clearly negative prosody that requires no further signalling; the impossibility of a literal interpretation is immediate and the evaluative reading is automatic.

Example 2

دقيت عليك مليون مره

Literal: I called you a million times.

Communicative: I've been trying to reach you constantly.

Analysis: This is the most frequently recurring template in the entire corpus, attested with minimal variation across multiple independent submissions. Its recurrence is analytically significant beyond its individual prosodic profile: it suggests that [مليون + CONTACT VERB] has become an entrenched formulaic chunk in KA, a semi-preconstructed unit of the kind Sinclair (1991) identified as the idiom principle. Speakers are not composing this expression afresh each time; they are selecting it as a whole. The chunk carries its negative prosody as a built-in property of the formula.

Example 3

الف مره قلت لك / ألف مره ناديتج / الف مره قتلك

Literal: A thousand times I told you / A thousand times I called you / A thousand times I said to you.

Communicative: I've said this over and over / I've been calling and calling / I've told you time and again.

Analysis: These three utterances, attested independently, share the frame [ألف + مره + PAST COMMUNICATION VERB + SECOND-PERSON RECIPIENT]. Each is syntactically complete without any stated negative outcome; the grievance is implied by the structure. The verb slot accepts calling (ناديتج), saying (قلت), and telling (قتلك), confirming the slot-filling productivity of the construction. This is the hallmark of a grammaticalised complaint device: the evaluative meaning resides in the frame as much as in any individual lexical item, and the communicative verb slot can be filled by different verbs without altering the prosodic outcome.

Example 4

كلمتك ٦٠ ألف مره ليش ماترد

Literal: I contacted you 60 thousand times. Why do you not answer?

Communicative: I've tried to reach you over and over. Why aren't you getting back to me?

Analysis: This example escalates the hyperbolic quantity by compounding ٦٠ + ألف to produce 60,000. Whether this escalation reflects genuine rhetorical intensification or simply idiolectal variation in the choice of hyperbolic numeral cannot be determined from the co-text alone. The prosodic outcome is identical: the compound numeral is an amplifier of exasperation within a frame whose complaint status is made explicit by the rhetorical question ليش ماترد "why don't you answer?". Notably, once a numeral crosses the threshold into unambiguous hyperbole, as all three of ألف, مليون, and ٦٠ ألف do, increases in magnitude appear to

produce no corresponding increase in the intensity of the complaint. Channell's (1994: 97) observation that "large round numbers function as undifferentiated intensifiers once they exceed a certain scalar threshold" is directly confirmed.

Example 5

جم مره قلت سو الشغل زين مليون مره قعد تطشرون الزباين

Literal: How many times have I said do the work well? A million times. And still you keep losing the customers.

Communicative: I've told you again and again: do the job properly. And still you keep driving the customers away.

Analysis: This utterance situates مليون in a professional context rather than an intimate or familial one. The structure is a rhetorical question self-answered by مليون مره, followed by a description of the addressee's continued non-compliance. This example confirms that the negative prosody of مليون in complaint frames is not restricted to personal relationships: it extends into workplace contexts, where the speaker's authority and repeated instructions have been disregarded. The prosodic profile is consistent across relational contexts.

Example 6

الف مره قلتك لا تاذيني الحجي

Literal: A thousand times I told you, do not hurt me with words.

Communicative: I've said it again and again: don't speak to me that way.

Analysis: Here ألف appears in a context of emotional rather than practical grievance. The injury is verbal (الحجي "talk/words"), and the utterance conveys accumulated suffering rather than mere inconvenience. This example extends the prosodic scope of ألف: the numeral intensifies not just practical failures: emotional and relational grievances draw on the same construction with equal frequency. The negative prosody here carries a heavier affective charge than the contact-related complaint examples, though the structural frame is identical.

4.4 Hyperbole and intensification: Positive prosody

Five instances classified as mixed or neutral within the hyperbole and intensification category represent cases where large round numbers appear in compliment, blessing, and greeting contexts. These instances are analytically important because they establish that the negative prosodic alignment of مليون and ألف is not invariant: the direction of evaluation is determined by the frame, not by the numeral.

Example 7

والله انك بمليون رجال

Literal: By God, you are [worth] a million men.

Communicative: I swear, you're one in a million. You're worth more than anyone.

Analysis: The oath والله "by God" is a sincerity marker, signalling the speaker's genuine commitment to the compliment. مليون here quantifies personal worth rather than repeated actions, and the evaluative direction is strongly positive. The same numeral that intensifies complaint in the overwhelming majority of its co-textual environments here intensifies admiration. Partington's (2004) concept of prosodic flexibility is directly illustrated: the evaluative meaning of مليون is not fixed but is constituted in context.

Example 8

كل عام وانت بخير عقبال المليون سنه

Literal: Every year and you in good health. Until the million years.

Communicative: Happy anniversary! May you have a million more years of health and happiness.

Analysis: This blessing formula extends the conventional عقبال المية سنه "until a hundred years" by substituting مليون سنه, amplifying the warmth of the wish. In this context, a larger number signals more generous goodwill rather than greater exasperation. The positive prosody is generated by the blessing frame, not by the numeral, and the numeral's contribution is to intensify the frame's existing evaluative direction.

Example 9

عندي الف شغلة بس فاضي لك

Literal: I have a thousand tasks but I am free for you.

Communicative: I've got loads to do, but I always have time for you.

Analysis: This utterance is the most structurally complex example of positive prosody ألف in the dataset. The first clause invokes ألف in an apparently negative frame (a thousand tasks to complete), but the second clause counters immediately with an affective positive: the addressee takes priority over all other demands. The overall evaluative effect is warm. ألف in the first clause is functioning as a setup for the prosodic reversal of the second, a deliberate subversion of expectation of the kind Partington (2004: 131) described as a tension between "collocational expectation and actual collocational realisation." The negative expectation is invoked only to be overturned, and the warmth of the second clause is intensified by the contrast.

4.5 Repetition and frequency: A transitional zone

Repetition and frequency is the largest category in the corpus at 83 instances and analytically significant because it occupies a transitional zone between literal counting and affective intensification. At one end of the cline are utterances where the numeral represents a plausible actual count; at the other end are cases that function in the same way as the canonical hyperbolic intensifiers in Section 4.3. The prosodic split documented in Figure 4 (27% negative for ألف, with a positive component of 18%) reflects this transitional character.

Example 10

قعدتك من النوم عشر مرات ما قعدت

Literal: I woke you from sleep ten times and you did not get up.

Communicative: I tried to wake you up ten times and you simply wouldn't move.

Analysis: The numeral "ten" occupies precisely the transitional zone described above. Ten attempts to wake a sleeper is a plausible literal count, but the complaint frame, failed effort and addressee's persistent non-compliance, parallels the negative prosody of the *مره مليون* and *مره ألف* examples. The prosodic outcome is negative, but the mechanism is different: the numeral is not self-evidently hyperbolic, and the complaint reading depends more heavily on the surrounding co-text than in cases where *مليون* produces automatic non-literal inference. This confirms that the boundary between literal and hyperbolic numerical use is not sharp in KA but is gradient, with smaller numerals in complaint frames occupying an intermediate position.

Example 11

شربت قهوه مرتين اليوم

Literal: I drank coffee twice today.

Communicative: I've had two coffees today.

Analysis: The dual form *مرتين* "twice" is a small quantity expression, and this utterance carries no evaluative loading that would invite a non-literal reading. The prosody is neutral and the numeral is a straightforward factual quantifier. This case represents the literal end of the repetition and frequency cline: a small, specific, non-round value in a purely informational frame.

Example 12

كلمتك عشرين مره ما سمعت / قلتلك خمسين مره لا تروح

Literal: I called you twenty times, you didn't hear / I told you fifty times don't go.

Communicative: I called you over and over and you weren't listening / I said it again and again: don't go.

Analysis: These two utterances sit closer to the hyperbolic end of the repetition cline. *عشرين* "twenty" and *خمسين* "fifty" are larger values than *عشر*, and both appear in complaint frames with implied negative outcomes (*ما سمعت* "you didn't hear"; the negative command *لا تروح* suggests non-compliance). Whether twenty or fifty is intended literally or hyperbolically is indeterminate, but the pragmatic effect of both is negative intensification of a reproach. Channell (1994) noted that the boundary between literal round numbers and hyperbolic ones is permeable at the lower end of the scale; these examples confirm that finding in KA.

4.6 Time and duration: Temporal intensification

Seventeen instances in the time and duration category deploy numerals not to quantify frequency of repeated actions but to measure elapsed or anticipated time. The moderate negative tendency documented in Figure 3 (41% negative) reflects the pervasiveness of waiting and delay as evaluatively charged topics in the corpus.

Example 13

قاعد انطرك من مية سنة / صار لي مليون ساعة ادور المحل

Literal: I have been waiting for you since a hundred years / It has been a million hours that I have been looking for the shop.

Communicative: I've been waiting for you for an absolute age / I've been looking for this place for what feels like forever.

Analysis: These two utterances shift the hyperbolic frame from frequency to duration: *سنة مية* "a hundred years" and *ساعة مليون* "a million hours" quantify elapsed time rather than repeated actions. The prosodic outcome is impatience and mild reproach in both cases, confirming that the large-number-to-negative-prosody mapping extends from frequency contexts to temporal ones. The productive extension of the same evaluative logic across different grammatical slots confirms that the mapping is conceptually robust rather than construction-specific.

Example 14

صارلي ساعة ناطرة بالسيارة / صارلي عشر دقائق ناطره

Literal: It has been an hour [that] I have been waiting in the car / Ten minutes have passed [while] I am waiting.

Communicative: I've been sitting in the car waiting for an hour / I've been waiting here for ten minutes.

Analysis: Both utterances describe waiting, but the numerals differ in scale and in the certainty of their evaluative loading. *ساعة* "an hour" of waiting is clearly excessive in most social contexts, and the prosody is mildly negative. *عشر دقائق* "ten minutes" is closer to the literal-to-borderline zone: ten minutes of waiting may or may not be experienced as excessive depending on the

implied social contract. Neither numeral is self-evidently hyperbolic, but both carry an impatient evaluative charge generated by the waiting frame rather than by the numeral itself.

4.7 Other numeric reference: Literal, factual, and culturally embedded uses

With 31 instances, other numeric reference is the most heterogeneous category in the corpus. Most are simply literal: numerals in factual exchanges about price, quantity, or schedule. A small number, however, carry evaluative meaning that is determined by cultural convention rather than by prosodic accumulation, and these cases constitute some of the most analytically interesting material in the dataset.

Example 15

جم الحساب طلع؟ ثمن دانير؟! (How much did the bill come to? Eight dinars?!) (Arabic)

Literal: How much did the bill come to? Eight dinars?!

Communicative: How much was the bill? Eight dinars?!

Analysis: The numeral ثمن "eight" is a precise monetary figure in a transactional frame. The non-round value of eight signals literal intent, the frame is informational rather than evaluative, and the prosody is neutral. This is the default referential use of numerals and provides the baseline against which the evaluative uses documented in earlier sections stand in sharpest contrast.

Example 16

قمر 14 (Moon of fourteen / Moon of the fourteenth.) (Arabic)

Literal: Moon of fourteen / Moon of the fourteenth.

Communicative: You are as beautiful as the full moon.

Analysis: This is a widely attested Arabic compliment formula referencing the fourteenth night of the lunar month, when the moon is at its fullest. The numeral ١٤ does not function here as a hyperbolic scalar intensifier or as a literal count. It is a cultural index: it points to the full moon as a recognised standard of beauty within an established metaphorical and poetic tradition. The evaluative meaning is strongly positive, but it is not generated by prosodic accumulation through repeated co-occurrence in evaluative environments. It is instead a fixed, culturally determined conventional meaning. This case illustrates a fundamental limit of purely corpus-distributional accounts of numerical prosody: some numerical meanings are encoded in cultural convention rather than in statistical co-occurrence patterns, and recovering them requires cultural competence rather than collocation analysis (Nelson et al., 1996).

Example 17

انت افضل 1 (You are the best 1 / You are number one.) (Arabic)

Literal: You are the best 1 / You are number one.

Communicative: You're the best! / You're number one.

Analysis: The digit 1 functions here as a ranking marker, drawing on the ordinal convention that first place is the highest evaluation. The prosody is strongly positive, but the evaluative mechanism is ordinal rather than scalar: 1 is not evaluatively positive because it is large, but because it occupies the top of a ranking scale. This case confirms that the prosodic values of numerals in KA cannot be reduced to a single logic; different numerals and different uses of the same numeral operate through different evaluative mechanisms.

Example 18

اربعة وعشرين ساعه ناييم (Twenty-four hours sleeping.) (Arabic)

Literal: Twenty-four hours sleeping.

Communicative: You've been asleep for a full twenty-four hours.

Analysis: The non-round numeral اربعة وعشرين "twenty-four" carries hyperbolic force in this context, but not through a pure magnitude logic. It is hyperbolic because twenty-four is culturally legible as the total number of hours in a day: sleeping for twenty-four hours is not merely sleeping for a large quantity of time, it is sleeping for all of time, the maximal possible quantity of sleep within a single day-cycle. This suggests that the scale relevant to hyperbolic interpretation in KA is not always a raw numerical magnitude scale but a culturally mediated scale of contextually maximal values. Claridge (2011: 29) noted that hyperbole frequently operates through reference to "culturally recognised maxima rather than absolute numerical extremes", and this case is a clear illustration of that principle.

5. Discussion

Large round numbers in KA are evaluative amplifiers. What is less predictable is how consistently their prosodic direction is constituted by the co-text rather than fixed in the numeral itself. This is precisely the relational, context-dependent account of prosody that Stewart (2010) advanced in response to Whitsitt's (2005) critique, and the present data provide empirical evidence for it: the same numeral (مليون) occurs with negative prosody in 94% of its hyperbolic uses, yet it also appears in 5 unambiguously warm and positive instances. The evaluative direction is not housed in مليون but in the collocational environment that contextualises it.

What the quantitative analysis in Figures 1 through 3 makes visible, and what close reading alone would struggle to document, is the strength and consistency of the association between hyperbolic numerals and negative evaluative environments. A 94% negative alignment for hyperbole and intensification is a very strong distributional tendency, and it is consistent with the broader pattern documented by McCarthy and Carter (2004) in English spoken conversation, where large-number hyperbole is predominantly, though not exclusively, recruited in complaint and reproach contexts. The present data extend and add precision to that observation: the negative prosody of hyperbolic numerals in KA is within certain formulaic frames (the [مليون/ألف + مره + CONTACT VERB] construction), the association is essentially categorical.

A large neutral proportion (55 to 68% across the three main items) confirms that not all evaluative uses of numerals in KA involve unambiguous hyperbole. Numerals in the repetition and frequency zone occupy a gradient between literal counting and affective intensification, and their prosodic value is more sensitive to local co-text than the purely hyperbolic cases. This is consistent with Channell's (1994: 91) account of the "approximator gradient" and with Norrick's (2004) observation that extreme case formulations shade into more moderate quantity claims as the claimed quantity decreases. The functional flexibility of repetition and frequency numerals, their capacity to appear in both neutral and negative prosodic environments, makes them analytically important as evidence that the prosodic system of KA numbers is not binary.

Waiting has cultural salience in this corpus, which accounts for the moderate negative tendency in the time and duration category (41%): waiting for a person, waiting for a message, waiting in queues or traffic. In each of these contexts, a temporal numeral situates elapsed time as excessive or unacceptable rather than simply quantifying it. Evaluation is generated by the frame, not the numeral.

Culturally embedded numerical expressions *انت افضل 1 اربعة وعشرين ساعه, ثلاثين على الخال* demonstrate the limits of a purely distributional approach to prosody. Their evaluative meanings are not recoverable from frequency data alone; they require cultural competence. Overstreet's (2014) argument that corpus-distributional methods cannot fully capture the cultural mediation of quantity expressions is borne out here. The evaluative meanings of these culturally embedded forms require cultural competence that collocation profiles alone cannot supply, and close qualitative reading is not supplementary to the frequency analysis but necessary to it.

6. Conclusion

Three numerals account for 82% of the 547 participant-elicited utterances in this corpus: *مليون*, *ألف*, and *مئة*. The data were collected via Mentimeter, normalised through a joint cleaning procedure, and coded independently by both authors before discrepancies were resolved in discussion. Prosodic polarity analysis shows that the evaluative direction of each item is shaped principally by the grammatical construction in which it appears rather than by any intrinsic weight in the numeral itself. Close reading of representative examples across the four functional categories then supplied the interpretive content that frequency counts alone cannot deliver.

Stewart's (2010) relational account of prosodic value is confirmed here in a spoken variety and informal register that the semantic prosody literature has not previously examined. Beyond that confirmation, they add empirical specification to the descriptive picture of Gulf Arabic intensification that Holes (2004, 2010) sketched on qualitative grounds: the patterns he identified are consistent, documentable, and distributed in ways that frequency data can characterise. The culturally embedded expressions, particularly *14 قمر* and the blessing and greeting formulae, also establish a point that McCarthy and Carter (2004) and Channell (1994) did not need to address in English data: not all numerical evaluative meaning in KA is recoverable from distributional evidence. Some of it requires cultural knowledge that purely quantitative methods cannot supply, and future work on numerical prosody in Arabic will need to combine both.

The study has some limitations. The dataset is moderate in size and was elicited rather than ambient; it captures what participants chose to produce in response to a task rather than a random sample of naturally occurring KA speech. The absence of demographic data prevents examination of variation by age, gender, or regional background within Kuwait. The analytical procedure is qualitative at the level of individual examples and quantitative only at the level of functional and prosodic category counts; more granular corpus statistical measures would require a considerably larger dataset. Future work might usefully combine elicited data with social media corpora, incorporate demographic variables, and extend the comparison to other Arabic varieties to test whether the prosodic patterns documented here are specific to Kuwaiti usage or reflect broader Arabic pragmatic conventions.

What the present data establish, within these constraints, is that numbers in KA are not semantically inert tools for counting. They carry evaluative histories absorbed from the co-textual environments in which they habitually appear, and those histories shape their communicative function in ways that are systematic, culturally grounded, and pragmatically consequential. A large round number in KA is almost always doing something beyond arithmetic. Something that needs to be looked at from different perspectives, such as prosody and indexicality (See Nofal, 2026 for indexicality of colours).

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