Renewing a Dynamic Cognitive Philology of Numerals
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In his 1935 book The psycho-biology of language, the linguist George Kingsley Zipf introduced the concept of dynamic philology, emphasizing the quantifiable aspects of linguistic sciences, and particularly the observable effects of word and phoneme frequency and minimizing speaker effort, rather than the philologist’s concern with the social and cultural contexts of speakers, writers, and their linguistic productions. Unsurprisingly, Zipf’s modern impact has been in large-scale statistical analyses of word frequencies in corpus linguistics and psycholinguistics, while many humanists are rightly skeptical of anything calling itself philology that is divorced from social context. The present paper uses the study of numeral systems - a core subject of traditional philology - to propose a different configuration of “dynamic philology”. I show how written numerical notations elucidate the numerical cognition of writers and their audiences, while remaining attentive to the social dimension of textual practices. Using a comparative analysis of ‘conspicuous computation’, the intentional use of unnecessarily large or exaggerated numbers in texts for discursive effect, I show that the violation of ‘least effort’ principles is symbolically effective. I also show that frequency effects are vitally important for understanding numerical systems – but not in the ways that Zipf imagined.