

Will the real numeronym please stand up

Abstract

A discussion, containing numerous examples, of English words originating in number names or numeronyms.

Some words originate in a particular geographical place. Such *toponyms* have gained special popularity with edibles (parmesan, tabasco, roquefort) and potables (port, tequila, mocha and perhaps coffee), but appear in many other contexts, as well (e.g. damask, angora, china). We find another interesting source of words in the names of individuals: nicotine, mackintosh, boycott and lynch can serve as examples of such *eponyms*, and so does a practically endless list of plants (such as bougainvillea, fuchsia, gardenia, and begonia). So when I started to collect words originating in numbers, I called them *numeronyms*, by analogy. Recently I googled this word and to my frustration found that some less-than-discerning users have hijacked it, and use it for something entirely different, such as ‘K9’ for canine, ‘4-1-1’ for information, and ‘i18n’ for internationalization (i, 18 letters, n).

In the following I shall strictly confine myself to words originating in number names. I must point out that since the latter have their origins, as well, we often come across the reverse order. Thus ‘first’ stems from Proto-Indo European (PIE) ‘pro-’. ‘before’, and ‘second’ comes from Latin ‘sequi’, ‘to follow’, and not *vice versa*.

In many words (including some of the following) we can easily recognize the numerical origin: We all know that triangles have three angles and octopi have eight feet. Some other words have had more success in disguising their source.¹ I find it necessary, however, to suggest some caution with regard to etymologies: In their fervor to discover “hidden number words”, some scholars may have gone further than available data permit. This phenomenon resembles misattributions related to numbers I have described elsewhere (Moore, 2005a, 2005b). In the following I use “perhaps” and “probably” whenever considerable doubt arises.

Keywords: *Numeronym; Number names; Language; Etymology.*

1. I have found many of the derivations appearing in this article in Harper (2001-2010).

0

- annul, annulment and nullify from 'null' (but see the number 1, below, for the origins of the latter).
- cipher and zero from Arabic 'sifr', '0'.

¼

- farthing (one quarter of a penny) from Anglo-Saxon 'feorthing', 'a fourthling' or 'fourth part'
- firkin (the fourth part of a barrel) from the Middle Dutch word 'vierdekijn', which means fourth.

½

- demigod, demiurge, demi-monde, demi-tasse, and several others: from French 'demi-', 'half'. However, demijohn does not mean one half of a john; it comes, rather, from French 'damejeanne' or 'Lady Jane'.
- hemidemisemiquaver (a sixty-fourth note or 1/64th) contains three different prefixes meaning 'half'.
- hemisphere: from Greek 'hemi-', 'half'.
- migraine: ultimately from Greek 'hemikrania', or 'half skull'.
- sandblind: an alteration of semi-blind.
- semiannual, semicircle, semicolon, semiconductor, and a practically inexhaustible list of other words with 'semi-' as a prefix: from Sanskrit 'semi-', 'half'. 'Semi' also serves as a noun: short for a semidetached house or a semi-trailer.

1

- a, an from Old English '1'. One could argue that 'nickname' and 'newt' (both resulting from faulty division: 'an eke name', and 'an ewte') now carry a residual of '1'.
- ace from Latin 'as', 'unity', similar to Greek 'eis', '1'.
- alone: all one.
- any: one-y.
- atone: at one.
- inch and ounce, both from Latin 'unus', '1'.
- minster, monk, monastery, monarch, mono, monad, monologue, monopoly, monotone, monocle, moniker (the last one perhaps from monk) and many more all carry the Greek prefix 'mono-', meaning '1', 'only', 'single'.
- non-, as a prefix of an endless list of words, from Latin 'noenum', 'not one'.
- null (but not 'nil') from Latin 'ne-', 'not' and 'illus', 'any', the diminutive of 'unus', '1'.
- only: one-ly.
- primal, primary, primate, prime, primer, primitive, primordial, primrose, primula, primus, prince, principal, principle, pristine, and others from Latin 'primus', 'first'. Since Latin 'primus' comes from PIE 'pro-', 'before' (see above), all the words starting with 'pro-' as a prefix (from

‘problem’ through ‘Prometheus’ to ‘proxy’) share their source with ‘first’ and ‘prime’, but do not derive from them.

- protocol, proton, protoplasm, prototype: from Greek ‘protos’, ‘first’.
- same, similar, simple, single, some, as well as the prefix ‘homo-’: we can trace back all of these and their variations to the same PIE base ‘sem’, meaning ‘1’, ‘together’.
- unite, universe, university from Latin ‘unus’, ‘1’.

2

- ambassador, ambidextrous, ambient, ambiguous, ambition, ambivalence, amble, ambulance, amputate, ancillary, and perhaps ambrosia and ampoule (though Harper, 2001, disagrees about the last two): all from the Latin prefix ‘ambi-’, meaning ‘both’.
- amphibian, amphipoda, amphitheatre, amphora, and others from the Greek prefix ‘amphi’, ‘both’.

Tucker (1931, p. 14) suggests that not only ‘ambi-’, and ‘amphi-’, but also ‘am-’, ‘an-’, ‘em-’, and ‘en-’ all “contain the same form in disguise”, which takes us back to the PIE number name ‘ambho’, meaning ‘both’. This would extend our list of words containing a sense of ‘two’ practically endlessly.

- biceps, bicycle, bigamy, bike, billion (because it has twice six zeroes in the UK, but 10^9 , in the US; aka ‘a milliard’), binary, binocular, biscuit, bisect, combine, perhaps also balance and bias: all from Latin ‘bi-’, ‘twice’.
- bisque (creamy soup made usually from seafood) may come from ‘bis cuites’, ‘twice cooked’ (just like ‘biscuit’, above), though others think it derives from Biscay, a Basque province in Spain.
- Deuteronomy (the fifth book of the *Pentateuch*) from Greek: ‘second law’.²
- Deuterium (also called heavy hydrogen), Deuteriosis (the collection of commentaries on written Hebrew law, ‘*Mishna*’), and many others from Greek ‘deutero-’, ‘second’.
- digamy (a second marriage, also called deuterogamy), dilemma, diploma, diplomat, disyllabic etc. contain the Greek prefix ‘di-’, meaning ‘2’.
- difference, dimension, dine, disciple, discord, dissect, distance, diverge, divert, divide, etc., as well as an endless list of words using the prefix ‘dis-’ (from disability through disgust to disuse): all based on the Latin prefix ‘dis-’, ‘apart’, which comes from PIE ‘dwis’, ‘2’. ‘Dis’ also serves as a noun, meaning ‘disrespect’, or a verb, meaning ‘dismiss’. We can recognize ‘dis-’ in the prefixes ‘de-’ and ‘des-’, as well, thus providing a further endless extension of our list of words containing ‘2’. Notice, however, that ‘dysfunction’ represents a simplified spelling of ‘dysfunction’, unrelated to the above.
- devil, diabetes, diabolic, diadem, diagnose, dialect, dialogue,³ diarrhea, diaspora, diatribe: all of these, and many more, contain the Greek prefix ‘dia-’, ‘through, apart’, which, according to Menninger (1977, p. 176), originates in ‘2’.

2. Though this constitutes a mistranslation of the Hebrew term meaning ‘a copy of this law’ (because it repeats most of the laws of Exodus; Harper, 2001-2010), the derivation from a number name remains correct in both Greek and Hebrew.

- divide, individual, widow, with, as well as withdraw, withhold, within, without, withstand: all of these contain the PIE root 'vi-' or 'wi', meaning 'separation' or '2'. 'Divide', therefore, has two roots, each ultimately meaning '2' (Menninger, 1977, p. 175).
- duet, doubt, dubious, duplicity from Latin 'duo', '2'. 'Duel' creates some difficulty, since it originates in Latin 'duellum', 'war'. Hunter (2001), therefore, regards its interpretation as 'a battle between two', evidenced, *inter alia*, by its equivalent in several languages, as based on a "fancied connection with duo 'two.'" However, Menninger (1977, p. 174) disagrees: He thinks both Latin 'duellum', and the later form 'bellum', originate in 'duis' and 'bis', respectively, and mean '2'.
- eye: from PIE 'oqw-', 'to see', akin to Sanskrit 'akshi', 'eye', which also means '2'.⁴
- Katherine -- perhaps from the Greek name Hekaterine, which came from 'hekateros', 'each of the two'.
- twist, twig, twine, twin, twill, betwixt, between, perhaps also twilight, tweed, twitch, tweak, twiddle and twirl – all from 'two'. But not tweezers: they come from French 'etui', 'small case'.

3

- testament, contest, attest all derive from Latin 'testis', 'witness', from PIE 'tris-', 'three', because the 3rd party serves as a witness to a contract. Apparently testicle also comes from the same source, "presumably because it 'bears witness' to virility" (Harper, 2001).
- thorough, through: Menninger (1977, p. 17) suggests that French 'très', 'very' also derives from (arguably very similar) Latin 'tres', '3', but others disagree: it comes from Latin 'trans'. However, PIE 'trejes', '3' may itself have a root in common with PIE 'tr-', 'through'. If so, 'through' and all the words with the prefix 'trans-' (or 'tran-' or 'tra-') bear a relation to, but do not directly originate in 'three'.
- tribe, tribute, tribune, trio, triad, triptych, treble, tercel (male falcon), terna (3 names submitted to the Pope), trilemma, trigonometry, tricycle, trillion (in the UK 1000000³, in the US 1000⁴), trident, tripod, Trismegistus (Hermes, 'the thrice greatest'), triumvirate, triune, trivial⁵ – all from Latin 'tri', '3'. Triage does not belong here, but rather originates in Old French 'trier', 'to pick, cull', itself traceable to Gallo-Romance 'triare', of unknown origin. However, due to the influence of the similarly sounding Latin 'tri-', '3', it has developed a sense of sorting, especially the wounded, into three groups.
- travail and travel: probably from Latin 'tripalis', 'having three stakes', an instrument of torture.⁶
- troika (originally three-horse team, later triumvirate) from Russian 'tri', '3'.

3. Whether 'dialogue' means a conversation between only two persons depends on how far back one goes. Mistaking the prefix 'dia-' for 'di-' has resulted in the translation of 'dialogue' into Hebrew, German and Hungarian as 'conversation of two'. Yet if we trace 'dia-' back to its roots, we indeed find that its meaning in Greek as 'apart' included the sense of 'two'.

4. Of course, Sanskrit 'two' may come from 'eye', and not *vice versa*!

5. See James Joyce's "...some of the means I use are trivial – and some are quadrivial" in McLuhan (1953).

6. As well as Trinidad (named by Columbus for its three peaks) and Tripolis (from Greek 'tria', '3'), though their inclusion opens a whole new list of numeronymical place names, such as Beer Sheva (perhaps '7 wells' in Hebrew) in Israel, Dreikirchen ('3 churches') in Germany, Hatvan ('60') in Hungary, etc. Of course, to native speakers such toponyms wear no disguise.

4

- cadre, quad, quadrant, quadratic, quadrille, quadrillion (in the UK 1000000⁴, in the U.S. 1000⁵), quart, quarter (with all three of its meanings), quarto, quarry, quatrain, quire, squad, square, and a large number of rare words (such as: quadrupedation -- stamping with four feet, or quatuorvirate -- a body of four men) starting with quad-, quart-, or quat-: all from Latin 'quattuor', '4'.
- catercorner, kitty-cornered, cata-cornered, or cater-cornered, probably also catawampus (in a diagonal position or arrangement): from French 'quatre', '4'. Not so, says Anatoly Liberman (2009): "Most probably, from a Scandinavian word for 'left' (hence 'not right, not straight, going across')".
- eight: Several sources (e.g. Hunter, 2001; Tylor, 1871/1913, p. 243) think that it may come from 'twice four', "...although the number word Four cannot be recognized in it linguistically" (Menninger (1977, p. 23).⁷ On p. 147 he suggests that the base 'ok' (as in 'octo-') meant 'tip' or 'peak' in PIE, and served as the root of 'quetuor', 'four', because of an ancient method of four-finger counting. (For other finger counting systems see Tylor, 1871/1913, pp. 245-246).
- tessaraglot, tessellate, tessera, tetraglot, tetrarch, trapeze, trapezium, and a large number of words with the prefix 'tetra-' (such as tetradactyl, tetragamy, tetragram, etc.) -- all from Greek 'tessares' or 'tettares', '4'.

5

- fist: probably from PIE 'pengke', 'five'.
- keno, probably through French from Latin 'quini' (5 each).
- Pentagon, Pentateuch from Greek 'pente', '5'.
- punch: from Hindi 'pañć', meaning '5', because of the 5 ingredients needed to prepare this beverage: arrack, sugar, lemon juice, spice, and water.
- quintessence (the 5th, in addition to the 4 elements), quintillion (in the UK 1000000⁵, in U.S. 1000⁶), quints (short for quintuplet), and a large number of rare words (such as 'quinton' -- five-stringed tenor viol, or 'quinquefarious' -- arranged in 5 rows), starting with the prefix 'quin-': all from Latin 'quintus', 'fifth'.

6

- Hexapla (an edition of the Bible in six versions). hexagon, hexameter from Greek 'hex', '6'.
- semester – from Latin 'sex mensis', '6 months'.
- siesta: from Latin 'sexta hora', 'sixth hour'.
- sextan (recurring every sixth day, said of a fever), sextain (stanza of 6 lines), sextant, sextet, sexto -- from Latin 'sextans', 'sixth'.

7. Tylor (1913, p. 243) describes several counting systems which express numbers larger than 3 by doubling lower ones, such as 4 = 2 and 2, 6 = 3 and 3, though he makes no specific mention of 8.

7

- hebdomadal (weekly) from Greek 'hepta', '7'.
- September from Latin 'septem', '7'.

8

- octane, octant, octave, October, etc. – from Latin 'octo', '8'.

9

- luncheon: from Middle English 'nonechenche', 'light mid-day meal', from 'none', 'noon' (see below) + 'schench'. 'drink'.
- nano: indicating units smaller by a factor of 10^{-9} , or one billionth of.
- noon: from Latin 'nona hora', 'ninth hour' of daylight.
- November from Latin 'novem', '9'.

10

- d as an abbreviation for penny in the old English monetary system originates in the Latin 'deni', 'every 10' (Menninger, 1977, p. 184).
- dean and doyen (perhaps also 'dicker') come from Greek 'deka', '10'.
- decade, December, deciliter, decimate, decimeter, Dekabrists (or Decemberists, named after the December 1825 uprising by Russian revolutionaries), dime: all from Latin 'decem', '10'.
- Dinar: the name of the official currency in several Muslim countries, from Latin 'denarius', 'containing ten'.
- Hungary, perhaps from the name of the Turkic tribe 'Onogur', '10 arrows' or '10 tribes'.
- tithe derives from Old English 'teotha', '10'.

12

- dozen from Latin 'duodecim', '12'.
- duodenum, a part of the intestine, whose length equals about 12 fingers, from Latin 'duodeni', '12 each'.

14

- fortnight: a contraction of '14 nights'.

20

- hussar (light cavalry created in 15c Hungary): Menninger (1977, pp. 184-185) thought this came from Hungarian 'húsz', '20'. However, most sources disagree; it probably comes from Serbian 'husar', or 'kursar', 'pirate'.

40

- quarantine from Latin 'quadraginta', '40'.
- tesseraconter (a ship with 40 banks of oars) from Greek 'tesseraconta', '40'.

50

- Pentecost (the seventh Sunday after Easter) from Greek 'pentekonta', '50'; originally 'Shavuot' ('weeks', in Hebrew), a Jewish harvest festival observed on the 50th day after Passover.

60

- sexagenarian from Latin 'sexaginta', '60'.
- shock (sheaves of grain, and perhaps also 'a shock of hair') from an old German word 'schok' which originally indicated 'a group of 60'.

70

- Septuagint (sometimes denoted as LXX) and septuagenarian from Latin 'septuaginta', '70'.

80

- octogenarian from Latin 'octoginta', '80'.

100

- cent, centimeter, centennial, centipede, century, percent: from Latin 'centum', '100'⁸ (though in some of these it refers to 1/100). While some sources suggest that C (Roman numeral for 100) also derives from the same source, others disagree.
- The Centaur of mythology has nothing to do with 'centum'; neither has centaury (a flowering plant), named after a centaur. This, however, has not prevented the German mistranslation of the latter to 'Tausendgüldenkraut', with 'thousand' taking the place of 'hundred'.
- hecatomb, hectare from Greek 'hecaton', '100'.
- quintal (a weight of 100 pounds): from Latin 'centenarius'. 'containing 100' (and not from 5, as one might guess).

200

- bicentennial from Latin for 200.

1000

- millennium, millimeter, million, milliard, mile, milfoil: all of these derive from Latin 'mille', '1000', though in some cases it stands for 1/1000. As with C, above, some sources suggest that M (Roman numeral for 1000) derives from the same source, but others disagree.

8. Notice that 'centum' and 'hundred' have a common root: PIE 'kmtom'.

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- k (short for 1000), kilobyte, kilogram, kilometer, kilowatt: from Greek 'khilioi', '1000'.

10000

- myriad from Greek 'myrias', '10000'.

100000

- lac, lacquer and shellac probably from Sanskrit 'laksha', '100000', owing to the vast number of aphid-like insects that make resin run out of certain trees.

So ends my non-exhaustive list of numeronyms. Inadvertent omissions aside, the existence of living prefixes (such as dis-, non-, semi-, etc.) renders the task of enumerating all of them clearly impossible. The sources of the words we use, both immediate and distant, fascinate many of us. Though their ultimate origins remain unknown (and probably unknowable), even this partial list shows the important role words indicating numbers play in our language.

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