

When numbers outnumber the fingers on your hand

by Sabine Eiche

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The first thing I do when I'm in the shower is toe-touching. It keeps me flexible (from the Latin "flexibilis", based on the verb "flectere", to bend; "flectere" also means to alter – consider our words deflect, reflect, inflect). Stretching my arms down, I count in one or other of the languages I know best – English, German and Italian. Recently I started to wonder why some words for numbers seem similar and others unrelated. To my amazement, in spite of their apparent differences, the English, German and Italian numerals one to ten (whether or not cognate with Latin or Greek) ultimately share the same Proto-Indo-European root.

It's easy to imagine that when people started counting, no matter where in the world they lived or how they spoke, they would count on the fingers of their two hands. Thanks to our anatomy, ten was a common unit. But when people counted beyond ten, the words sometimes followed a different pattern. The ancient Romans were precise and logical – eleven was expressed as one and ten ("undecim", which became the Italian "undici"); twelve was two and ten ("duodecim", "dodici" in Italian). However, the English eleven, twelve (as also the German "elf", "zwölf") can be traced back to a compound of Germanic origin meaning literally one (or two) left over ten. Counting resumed what we'd call logic at thirteen when the suffix "teen", the Old English form of ten, was attached to the numerals up to nineteen (in German the suffix was "zehn", meaning ten, as in "dreizehn", etc.). For twenty, thirty, forty, and so on, English added the suffix "ty" (from the Old English "tig", denoting a group of ten; German did similar, adding the suffix "zig").

Centuries ago, before there were fast and standardized ways for keeping track of large quantities, people had words for sets or groups of numbers. Score, for example, referred to twenty, from the Old English “scoru”, which in turn derives from Old Norse “skor”, meaning notch. Notches cut in a piece of wood (known as a tally) were grouped in sets of twenty, and score eventually came to signify the number twenty. Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address of 1863 famously began “Four score and seven years ago,” referring to the Declaration of Independence (1776) of 87 years previously. Colloquially, we still say a score of times to mean often.

Numbers grouped in sets of twelve were also convenient. There probably isn’t a day when we don’t use the word dozen, which has its root in the Latin “duodecim”, twelve. And a gross, that is 144 (a dozen dozen), comes from the Old French “grosse douzaine”, large dozen.

The British Isles once had an entire vocabulary for counting sheep, with some variations from region to region. Shepherds would do head counts in units of twenty, or scores, but they also had individual terms for the numbers from one to twenty – of which the most memorable (I thought) was the word for fifteen, bumfit.

Now, in the shower, when I feel confident, I toe-touch a score of times. When I feel sheepish, I stop at bumfit.