

Oneteen and Twoteen

November 11, 2011



Today is November 11, 2011 — or, 11/11/11. It is a very “eleven” day.

But with the number 12, eleven captures an odd spot, linguistically. While all the other numbers (excluding zero to ten) seem to follow a formulaic pattern, these two — at first blush, at least — are outliers. In short, “11” is not “oneteen” and for that matter, “12” is not “twoteen.” What is going on here?

While you may think that the words emerged from a base-12 numbering system — think months of the year, hours in half a day, or inches in a foot — it turns out that this simply isn’t the case. “Eleven” is actually a base-10 term. The word “eleven” is derived from the Old English word “endleofan” (pronounced “end-lih-fen”) which itself comes from the Germanic “ainlif,” a compound word: “ain” means “one” and “lif” was a version of the word “left.” (The word “leave” has the same root.) Combined, “ainlif” means “one left.” Imagine a Germanic goat herder from the early Middle Ages counting his flock, putting them in units of ten — but missing his estimate and ending up with one left over. That last one is “ainlif” — “eleven.”

The word “twelve” follows a similar construct, from the terms “twelf” in

Old English and “twalif” at its Germanic roots. Again, the word “ten” is assumed and the math still works: “eleven” is really “ten plus one” and “twelve” is “ten plus two.” There is nothing [duodenary](#) about their names.

For 13 to 19? “Teen” simply means “ten more than,” and of course, the prefix is self-explanatory. And no, we do not know why there is a linguistic split after twelve. Both the “teen” and “lif” terms developed at roughly the same time — probably around the year 900. The antiquity of these terms makes it impossible to determine the reason for certain.

Bonus fact: “Twelve plus one” is an anagram of “eleven plus two.” (And for whatever it is worth, “twoteen plus one” is an anagram of “oneteen plus two,” obviously.)

From the Archives: [And, the 27th Letter of the Alphabet](#): The etymology of the term “ampersand.”

Related: [This is Spinal Tap](#). If you do not know why this is related to the above, you really need to watch the movie. \$9.99 to buy as a digital download; used VHS cassettes are available for a penny (plus shipping); and you can rent it digitally for \$2.99. It has 397 reviews, fewer than 10% of which are for three or fewer stars.