NUMBERS IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

ZOLTÁN Ildikó Gy.[1]

Abstract

Idioms are most fascinating because of what they tell us about the way of thinking and the outlook upon life of the people who speak the language that has produced them. The present paper is not an attempt to exhaustively list all the English idioms that contain numbers, but to present the probable or possible origin of a few more interesting or intriguing 'specimens'.

Keywords: idiom, number, language, English, origin

The story of numbers goes back to prehistoric times when our forebears first began to count, using their body parts, most notably their fingers. Certain number names in Indo-European languages can be traced back to a root that also occurs in the word 'finger', as reflected in the Latin 'digitus', related to the English 'toe'.

The first 'instruments' used for counting and keeping record (other than digits) date from the Stone Age. The oldest tally sticks, which are in fact bones and other artefacts with notches cut into them, date from more than 30,000 years ago. The tallying system is considered to be the first abstract numeral system, although it had limited representation of large numbers. These tally marks are said to have later gradually developed into various types of proto-writing and eventually to have been at the origin of the Cuneiform script (and possibly of the ogham script), as well as that of the Roman numerals.

In English all numerals and ordinals up to a million (from the Latin 'mille', a thousand) are Anglo-Saxon, with one notable exception: 'second'. The Anglo-Saxon word for this was 'other' (as first, other, third, etc.), but since this must often have been a source of misunderstanding, the French 'seconde' was adopted instead.

The often complicated meaning of numbers as symbols can be traced back to very old times in most cultures and religions, but is becoming less and less apparent or significant in modern times. During the ages, numbers were often seen as the manifestation of cosmic and human orders, as reflections of the harmony of the spheres, or as masculine or feminine principles. The Golden Section is best-known among the numerical relationships which were considered and obeyed not only in architecture, the fine arts, music and literature, but also in customs, both sacred and profane.

[1] Asistent univ., Universitatea „Petru Maior", Târgu-Mureş

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What symbolic meaning was assigned to certain numbers did of course depend on the counting system that stood behind them, in close connection with the entire religious, cultural and historical background of that particular civilisation.

Occasionally, remains of this symbolic signification of numbers can still be detected in certain idioms, which are themselves a sort of linguistic fossils, harking back to times when some words – and numbers – were names 'to conjure with'.

Number

When you understand a person's true character, real motives or intentions, especially when you realise his/her faults, weaknesses, or dishonesty – and thereby gain some advantage – you are said *to get/ have someone's number*. This phrase most probably refers to numerology, which itself means 'study of the occult meaning of numbers'. The study and use of numbers (such as the figures in a birth date) to interpret their supposed influence on a person's character, life, or future is based on Pythagoras' assertion that all things can be expressed in numerical terms because they are ultimately reducible to numbers. Modern numerology uses a method similar to that of the Greek and Hebrew alphabets (where a letter can also represent a number) to attach a series of digits to someone's name. These, together with the date of birth, are used to interpret a person's true nature or divine their future.

Several other English idioms contain the word 'number': *to do one's number* means to give a performance or to behave in a predictable or customary manner; while *to do a number on someone* means to treat someone badly, typically by deceiving, humiliating, undermining, criticising, or defeating them in a calculated and thorough way.

Certain games in which the players have or draw numbers, one of which wins a prize, gave the expression *someone's (lucky) number comes up*, which is used when someone has suddenly become very lucky, especially in a game or in a competition.

Probably also from sports (in which a member of one team has the same number on his back as the person in the opposing team who performs the same part in the game) we have the term *someone's opposite number*, that is, the person who is in the same position or rank as someone in a different company, group, organisation, government, etc.

Written media is the source of another expression describing a person whose ideas or methods are out of date, or a thing that is considered old-fashioned and no longer important or useful: *a back number*, which originally meant an issue of a newspaper or magazine before the current one.

Originally a nautical expression referring to ships' making themselves known by signal under the number by which they were registered, *to make one's number* today means to formally announce one's arrival, pay a courtesy call, or report for duty.

In military slang they say of a bomb, bullet, or other missile that it did *(not) have someone's (name and) number on it* when it proved (not) to have been destined to hit a specified person, as if (not) supposedly earmarked by fate as the instrument for their extinction. This

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could originally have been a reference to either a lottery number or a number, such as that given to a soldier, by which one may be identified.

Similarly, the reference to either a lottery number or a personal one could be the explanation for the idiom *someone's number is up*, the time has come when someone is doomed to die or suffer in some other way (be in serious trouble, be found guilty, be scolded or punished, etc.). In the American army a soldier who has just been killed or has died is said to have 'lost his mess number'. An older phrase from the Royal navy for the same situation was 'to lose the number of his mess'. A third explanation refers to the various biblical passages on the 'number of one's days (i.e. of one's life)', see Job 38:21, for example.

An idiom that will assure the smooth transition to the discussion of numbers proper is *(to look after/ take care of) number one*, that is, one's own and most precious person, and used to suggest that whoever it might be, s/he is selfishly absorbed in protecting oneself and his/her own interests.

On a scale of 1 to 10

To draw up a complete list of English idioms containing numbers from one to ten would be an impossible undertaking, so here is a selection of a few more interesting or intriguing 'specimens' and their probable or possible origin.

When you have to start over and do something again because the previous effort has failed, you are *back to square one*. According to one explanation, this idiom is connected with the practice in England (in the days before televised sport) when soccer enthusiasts would huddle around the wireless listening to live commentary. In the 1920s Radio Times used to print a map of a football field with the field divided into numbered grids or squares so that listeners could locate the area of play and thus follow the action better. '*Back to square one'* meant that an attack was driven back to where it had begun. The difficulty with this theory is that the football grid was abandoned around 1940 and no record of the phrase predating 1960 has so far been found.

The alternative explanation for the origin, a board game with numbers for each square (like Snakes and Ladders, hopscotch and several others), is more simple and plausible – in these, players are sent back to the start if they land on a certain square.

If somebody manages to achieve two objectives with a single effort, to fulfil two purposes with one action, they are said *to kill two birds with one stone*. It would be remarkable indeed if someone slinging a stone at a bird got one bird, let alone two. There was a similar expression in Latin nearly 2,000 years ago and there are related phrases in several other languages, with variations in the number of victims or the victims themselves: they can be birds, hares, flies, etc.

Phrases used in the navy are a rich source for idioms. That is where one of the more suggestive terms for 'drunk' was borrowed from: *three sheets to/ in the wind (and tilting)*. On a sailing vessel a 'sheet' is the rope attached to the clew of a sail and used for trimming, or controlling it. If the sheet is allowed to go slack or flap without restraint, it is said to be 'in

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the wind', and as a result, the sail is ineffective. If several sheets are in the same sorry state, the ship goes erratically, like a drunkard.

Numbers four and five do not seem to be as richly represented as others in idioms. However, we talk about *(from all/) the four corners of the earth* when we want to say (from) everywhere, (from) all over, (from) the uttermost ends or remotest parts the world. The five senses are sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch – this is common knowledge. Less well-known is the reference to *the five wits*: common sense, imagination, fantasy, estimation and memory.

One step further and we get to the *sixth sense*, the uncanny ability to be aware of things, the mental power beyond the usual five in which some believe and others do not, but whose existence cannot be unequivocally denied.

Things that are in a state of confusion, in disarray, higgledy-piggledy; or people who have not been able to reach an agreement or come to a decision are *(all) at sixes and sevens*. The reference here is to a kind of dice game played in the 15th century in which people tried to throw a six or a sever (perhaps originally a five and a six). To roll such numbers was recognised as being very difficult, and betting on this kind of throw (i.e. only on the highest points that can be won) would only be attempted by the careless or the foolish. The phrase is such an old one that it is already used by Chaucer, and so popular that it later also occurs in the closing lines of Jonathan Swift's *Cadmus and Vanessa*:

> "The goddess would no longer wait,
> But rising from her chair of state,
> Left all below at six and seven,
> Harness'd her doves and flew to heaven."

People who are extremely happy or content, or possibly in a state of ecstasy, are either *in (the) seventh heaven*, or *on cloud (number) nine*. According to the pre-modern cosmography, the heavens were thought to be divided into spherical shells, one outside the other and varying in number from seven to eleven. Both Talmudic and Muslim authorities considered the 7th heaven to be the highest, where God existed and a state of eternal bliss was to be enjoyed. On the other hand, in the ten-part classification of heavens in Dante's Paradise (in the *Divina Commedia*) the ninth was next to the highest (the empyrean) and thus closest to the divine presence.

The fleeting nature of human fascination is mirrored in the expression applied to things, events, or persons that attract great initial interest or cause excitement for a short time and then are soon forgotten: *a nine days' wonder*. In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (1380) the saying is: *A wonder last but nyne night*. The expression, however, predates this work by over half a century.

There are a number of explanations for why interest should last for 9 days. One of them says that the phrase originally referred to an ancient Roman custom: after an unusual

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natural event that was thought to be a warning of bad fortune, there would be a period of religious activities that lasted 9 days.

Another theory connects it with the Catholic 'Novena', festivals of 9 days in which the statue of the saint being honoured is carried through the streets, accompanied by relics and votive offerings. (The Latin root 'novenus', 'nine each', might have been confused with 'novus', 'new, wonderful', thus perhaps reinforcing the 'wonder' element of the English phrase.) There may be something in this, as the medieval cult of saints is fairly well documented for England. St Edmund was widely venerated, and St George's popularity was at its highest in the 15th and 16th centuries. From 1415 St George's Day was raised in status to such a level ('festum duplex') that it was on par with Xmas day, and it was celebrated with 'ridings', or parades, featuring a model dragon and actors portraying the roles of St George and St Margaret. In fact, the cult of the saints was getting out of hand, so that in 1536 Henry VIII restricted it to those appearing in the New Testament plus St George, and processions with images were banned.

Most probably, however, its origin is in an old English proverb that can be traced back to the 15th century or even earlier, and was recorded in 1670: *A wonder lasts but nine days, and then the puppy's eyes are open*. Puppies, like kittens, are blind for the first 9 days of their lives and probably live in a wonderful and mysterious world of their own. After that their eyes are opened to the reality about them – which must be rather unexciting by comparison.

When people are dressed very smartly and elaborately, usually for a special occasion, they are *dressed (up) to the nines*. If 'nine' is indeed a number here, it suggests the sense 'to the greatest degree' as a mystical number representing finality, completion, or perfection. However, according to another more etymologically-minded explanation, the phrase is simply the corruption of the medieval 'to the *eyne*' – to the *eyes*, i.e. fashionably dressed from head to toe.

Also from the realm of clothes, or rather their maintenance, comes the warning according to which *a stitch in time saves nine*, reminding us that preventive action is wise under any circumstances since damage has a nasty tendency to worsen quickly if not repaired, and the mending of a fault or the solving of a problem as soon as it is noticed may save a lot of time, cost, trouble or extra work later.

Ten is a significant number from several points of view, but does not figure prominently in idioms. The only idiomatic phrase including it is relatively recent: *Number Ten*, that is, No. 10 Downing Street, London, which is the official residence of the British Prime Minister while s/he is in office. However, at least we can say that the expression is so specifically British that it is virtually un-translatable, since other languages do not – practically can not – have any phrase that would correspond to it.

Miscellaneous

When something is done or completed at the last possible moment, barely just in time, it happens *at the eleventh hour*. The phrase is an allusion to the biblical parable of the

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labourers (Matthew 20: 1-16), in which the workers who were hired at the eleventh hour (of a twelve hour working day) were paid the same sum of money as the ones who began in the first hour.

A person speaking rapidly and incessantly is said to talk *at nineteen to the dozen*. The first sense lays stress on the speed of the speech, a second one emphasises rather the apparently unstoppable flow of words. Why nineteen? There is no definite answer to this question, only possible suggestions. One rather unlikely theory is that it might refer to 18th century engines that could pump an impressive 19,000 gallons of water out of a mine fuelled by just 12 bushels of coal. Another explanation, according to which nineteen was ingeniously chosen because it is one short of a round number, and therefore unexpected, is just as debatable. Nonetheless, the phrase seems to be very much 'alive and kicking' and has since occurred in a range of extended contexts referring to other activities carried out rapidly and energetically: a heart can beat, fists can fly, or you can chop potatoes nineteen to the dozen.

A baker's dozen is a different kind of dozen: it is in fact thirteen, or in a broader sense, the regular amount, plus a little extra. The first, quite plausible suggestion claims that bakers, when not selling directly to the public, would include a 13th loaf with every batch or dozen. This constituted the middleman's profit. However, most authorities, together with the Worshipful Company of Bakers in London, say that the phrase arose from the Assize of Bread and Ale, an act of the English Parliament in 1262, laying down standards of weight of bread. Bakers of the period had a reputation for selling underweight loaves and therefore stringent regulations were introduced, establishing a standard weight for the different types of bread. A spell in the pillory could be expected if short weight were given. Just to be on the safe side, bakers started to give an extra piece of bread away with every loaf (called the 'inbread') or an extra loaf (or 'vantage loaf') with each dozen.

The most fitting description for a circular nonsensical problem, a dilemma which the victim cannot escape from, or a difficulty such as an unfair and unreasonable rule that prevents one from escaping from an unpleasant or dangerous situation is a *catch-22 (situation)*. This is the title of Joseph Heller's book from 1961 in which "Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to."

Another idiom from the second half of the 20th century is *the 64(,000) dollar question*, which has come to mean the most important question, the one upon whose answer everything depends. Originally it was just 64 dollars as reward for answering the most difficult of a set of questions on the radio programme with this very name, but which had its roots in an earlier American radio quiz show, popular during World War II, 'Take It or Leave It'.

A very beautiful woman can be described with a rather literary (possibly even pompous-sounding) expression as a/the *face that launched a 1000 ships*. The original face belonged to Helen of Troy, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of King Menelaus of Sparta, whose elopement with Paris provoked the Trojan War. In Christopher Marlow's

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'The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus' (1590-1604) Faustus greets her with the words: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships/ And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?"

More recently the expression has also been 'paraphrased' in a facetious, if irreverent manner into *a face that sank a thousand ships*.

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