

Looking at Language

It's About Time

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

Welcome to *two thousand ten*, or is it *two thousand and ten*, or is it *twenty ten*? I contend it's *twenty ten*, and here's why:

During most of our lives we used the following formula to name years: *nineteen forty one*, *nineteen eighty four*, and *nineteen ninety nine*.

Then we reached the year two thousand, after which, when we tried to say *twenty one*, we realized that we would be ambiguous because *twenty one* could mean 21. So we started saying *two thousand two*, *three*, etc. This new formula was probably influenced by Arthur C. Clarke's fantasy *Two Thousand and One: A Space Odyssey*, which preceded the year two thousand and one by 33 years.

But now that we've arrived at 2010, we realize that saying *twenty ten* is not ambiguous. *Twenty ten* allows us to return to the template of the nineteen hundreds, and saves five letters, one syllable, and one word.

That's the American way: When you can save letters and syllables, you go for it. That's why we usually say (or write) *done* instead of *finished* and *despite* instead of *in spite of*. That's why I predict that *twenty ten* (*eleven*, etc.) will win out over *two thousand ten* (*eleven*, etc.).

Then there's the decade debate. Does 2010 mark the beginning of a new decade, or does that milestone not appear till first second of next year? To hear and read the dozens of decade-nt summaries of the years 2000 through 2009 that recently appeared in newspapers and magazines and whizzed around the Internet, you'd think that the first decade of the 21st century ended just as 2009 ticked into 2010.

But bear in mind that Christ was one year old at the end of the first year A.D. and that the first decade A.D. did not run its course until the end of the year 10. Each new decade, then, begins with a year ending with the number one, not zero, so that the second decade of this century (and millennium) will begin at the first breath of 2011, not 2010.

And that first decade of the new century and millennium will have remained nameless. Some of us recall the Twenties, Thirties, and Forties; and more of us have lived through the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties.

Then, starting January 1, 2001, came the first nameless decade of our lives. We could have called it *The Zeros*, but that would have been too dismal. *The Noughts or Naughts*? Too negative. *The Aughts or Oughts*? Too prescriptive and ambiguous. *The Ohs*? Exuberant but also ambiguous. So we didn't call that decade anything.

And what shall we name the next decade, starting January 1, 2011? *The Teens* leap to mind, but 2011 and 2012 will not include numbers in the teens. Maybe we'll embrace *The Teens* when 2013 dawns.

Finally, let us note that the second day of this year—01/02/2010—reads the same forward and backward, coming and going. The next such January 2 will not occur for another 10,000 years—01/02/12010. Left-to-right-and-right-to-left patterns in language are called *palindromes*, from single words such as *deified* to compounds such as *race car* to statements such as the astonishing *Doc, note. I dissent. A fast never prevents a fatness. I diet on cod.*

Mirror-image dates—the next one will wink out at us on 11/02/2011—are commonly called *numerical palindromes*. I suggest a more compact sobriquet—*calindromes*.



Richard Lederer, Ph.D., is the author of more than 3,000 books and articles about language and humor. See order form for books by Richard Lederer on the next page.

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