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# 32st Annual Meeting

GÖRAN KJELLMER

On ordinal numerals in  
modern English

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IN MAY 2003 there was a notice on the World Wide Web announcing the “32st Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Association of the Southwest”. The announcement began:

The 32st Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Association of the Southwest will be hosted by the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) ...

Not long before that I had noticed an advertisement for the “33nd Annual New Jersey Irish Festival”, also on the Web. Such unexpected forms of the ordinal numerals naturally arouse one’s curiosity.

English ordinal numerals normally display a high degree of regularity. Cardinal numerals become ordinal by the addition of *-th*, except that those ending in 1 add *-st*, those in 2 add *-nd*, and those in 3 add *-rd*. 11, 12 and 13 follow the main rule and add *-th*. The examples quoted above thus deviate from those rules. Is this phenomenon a frequent one, and if so how can it be explained?

If one goes to the Web for information it is easy to get the impression that the phenomenon is indeed quite frequent. In order to illustrate it further, here is a selection of examples taken from the Web, where the term “misplaced” signifies deviation from the canonical system just presented.

## Misplaced *-st*

for *-nd*

32st Annual National Association of Industrial Technology

for *-rd*

Canadian Hypertension Society 23st Annual Meeting

for *-th*

Nebraska is the 44st state to convert to an EBT system.

## Misplaced *-nd*

for *-st*

April Journal – 21nd to 31st

for *-rd*

The 23nd Annual Breast Imaging Conference is designed for ...

for *-th*

Periodont – 24nd Issue (8th October 1995).

Editorial: Dear Sirs, This is the 24nd issue of the Mailing List Periodont.

## Misplaced *-rd*

for *-st*

Proceedings of the 31rd Annual Symposium on Foundations of Computer Science

for *-nd*

Music is Live concert – 22rd June 2001

for *-th*

Irish Notes 25rd April 2001 The latest news from Rallynews

## Misplaced *-th*

for *-st*

The 31th Anomalous Absorption Conference

for *-nd*

The 42th IEEE Conference on Decision and Control

for *-rd*

Rock On The Net: 43th Annual Grammy Awards – 2001

To get an idea of the actual use and distribution of the non-orthodox ordinal morphemes, I explored the Web by means of the search engine Google. The search was limited to the ordinals corresponding to the cardinals 1–50 in the English section of the Web as defined by Google. The

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**Table 1. Distribution of the ordinals of 1–50**

	-st	-nd	-rd	-th		-st	-nd	-rd	-th
<b>1</b>	5680000	19100	14100	55600	<b>26</b>	1700	1460	1460	1370000
<b>2</b>	28300	5900000	40400	101000	<b>27</b>	1220	1140	518	1340000
<b>3</b>	15800	35800	7280000	80500	<b>28</b>	1990	1150	631	1470000
<b>4</b>	15900	11800	19400	6060000	<b>29</b>	663	1880	486	1160000
<b>5</b>	7270	6580	14200	4470000	<b>30</b>	4720	326	2130	1650000
<b>6</b>	7710	10700	7160	3700000	<b>31</b>	1290000	193	485	37400
<b>7</b>	8510	5390	9980	3670000	<b>32</b>	1350	221000	1390	5170
<b>8</b>	16800	8580	8490	3590000	<b>33</b>	589	1700	237000	4790
<b>9</b>	8350	7220	7130	2920000	<b>34</b>	796	389	1360	244000
<b>10</b>	5630	240	4930	3620000	<b>35</b>	359	229	599	258000
<b>11</b>	11300	444	448	3220000	<b>36</b>	846	240	271	205000
<b>12</b>	6890	6350	733	2890000	<b>37</b>	609	109	205	187000
<b>13</b>	4540	306	6940	2270000	<b>38</b>	283	67	143	193000
<b>14</b>	3690	396	400	2210000	<b>39</b>	251	34	125	168000
<b>15</b>	3840	403	921	2480000	<b>40</b>	1290	69	551	324000
<b>16</b>	3320	588	313	2150000	<b>41</b>	184000	74	120	3920
<b>17</b>	2030	220	547	2240000	<b>42</b>	1090	234000	306	3140
<b>18</b>	2280	231	394	2420000	<b>43</b>	505	787	189000	3670
<b>19</b>	4460	433	189	2980000	<b>44</b>	433	166	399	178000
<b>20</b>	9210	716	1280	3740000	<b>45</b>	687	991	247	208000
<b>21</b>	3300000	2260	1670	59000	<b>46</b>	1350	43	64	151000
<b>22</b>	3870	1780000	3840	55900	<b>47</b>	1020	1890	49	159000
<b>23</b>	2010	6600	1360000	48400	<b>48</b>	712	391	83	161000
<b>24</b>	1950	1340	3460	1460000	<b>49</b>	557	38	53	178000
<b>25</b>	1580	880	1210	1860000	<b>50</b>	1290	300	936	755000

method used was simply to record the number of occurrences of each digit from 1 to 50 equipped with one of the suffixes *-st/-nd/-rd/-th*. Before the results are presented, some of the limitations should be considered.

The texts in the English section of the Web are certainly written in English, but that does not mean that all their authors have English as their first language. The section contains some texts that depart markedly from normal standards of correctness. Moreover, the Web is continually added to, so that search results obtained one day may not be fully valid the next day. It is also true that ordinals are more likely to be expressed in alphabetical rather than numerical terms (*first* rather than *1st*) for

the cardinals 1–10 than for the rest. But the most serious objection is surely that the suffixes *-st/-nd/-rd/-th* are sometimes used for other purposes than to designate ordinal numbers. Webster<sup>1</sup> lists a large number of such abbreviations, and although most of them are hardly relevant in this connexion, some quite clearly are. Here are a few examples:

Directions To Limner Gallery... Exit towards the downtown side of the platform, this will bring you to 32St and 6th Avenue.

Cobray M11 Magazine 32rd Zytel 9mm. \$27.99 \$25.99 On Sale!

In the first case 32St means ‘32nd Street’, and in the second 32rd (probably) means ‘32 rounds’.

**Table 2. Proportions of the ordinals of 1–50**

	% -st	% -nd	% -rd	% -th	Total		% -st	% -nd	% -rd	% -th	Total
<b>1</b>	98.5	0.3	0.2	1.0	100	<b>26</b>	0.1	0.1	0.1	99.7	100
<b>2</b>	0.5	97.2	0.7	1.7	100	<b>27</b>	0.1	0.1	0.0	99.8	100
<b>3</b>	0.2	0.5	98.2	1.1	100	<b>28</b>	0.1	0.1	0.0	99.7	100
<b>4</b>	0.3	0.2	0.3	99.2	100	<b>29</b>	0.1	0.2	0.0	99.7	100
<b>5</b>	0.2	0.1	0.3	99.4	100	<b>30</b>	0.3	0.0	0.1	99.6	100
<b>6</b>	0.2	0.3	0.2	99.3	100	<b>31</b>	97.1	0.0	0.0	2.8	100
<b>7</b>	0.2	0.1	0.3	99.4	100	<b>32</b>	0.6	96.5	0.6	2.3	100
<b>8</b>	0.5	0.2	0.2	99.1	100	<b>33</b>	0.2	0.7	97.1	2.0	100
<b>9</b>	0.3	0.2	0.2	99.2	100	<b>34</b>	0.3	0.2	0.6	99.0	100
<b>10</b>	0.2	0.0	0.1	99.7	100	<b>35</b>	0.1	0.1	0.2	99.5	100
<b>11</b>	0.3	0.0	0.0	99.6	100	<b>36</b>	0.4	0.1	0.1	99.3	100
<b>12</b>	0.2	0.2	0.0	99.5	100	<b>37</b>	0.3	0.1	0.1	99.5	100
<b>13</b>	0.2	0.0	0.3	99.5	100	<b>38</b>	0.1	0.0	0.1	99.7	100
<b>14</b>	0.2	0.0	0.0	99.8	100	<b>39</b>	0.1	0.0	0.1	99.8	100
<b>15</b>	0.2	0.0	0.0	99.8	100	<b>40</b>	0.4	0.0	0.2	99.4	100
<b>16</b>	0.2	0.0	0.0	99.8	100	<b>41</b>	97.8	0.0	0.1	2.1	100
<b>17</b>	0.1	0.0	0.0	99.9	100	<b>42</b>	0.5	98.1	0.1	1.3	100
<b>18</b>	0.1	0.0	0.0	99.9	100	<b>43</b>	0.3	0.4	97.4	1.9	100
<b>19</b>	0.1	0.0	0.0	99.8	100	<b>44</b>	0.2	0.1	0.2	99.4	100
<b>20</b>	0.2	0.0	0.0	99.7	100	<b>45</b>	0.3	0.5	0.1	99.1	100
<b>21</b>	98.1	0.1	0.0	1.8	100	<b>46</b>	0.9	0.0	0.0	99.0	100
<b>22</b>	0.2	96.5	0.2	3.0	100	<b>47</b>	0.6	1.2	0.0	98.2	100
<b>23</b>	0.1	0.5	96.0	3.4	100	<b>48</b>	0.4	0.2	0.1	99.3	100
<b>24</b>	0.1	0.1	0.2	99.5	100	<b>49</b>	0.3	0.0	0.0	99.6	100
<b>25</b>	0.1	0.0	0.1	99.8	100	<b>50</b>	0.2	0.0	0.1	99.7	100

All these reservations make it plain that occurrence statistics deriving from the Web have to be taken with not a few grains of salt.

The results of the searches are presented in Table 1.

It appears from the table that the Web contains a staggering number of occurrences of English ordinals: 97 million (96,923,029) for the figures 1–50. A great many of those are of the unorthodox, “incorrect” type. It is a fair guess that administrative and other routines can have brought about some of the irregularities. Documents used on one occasion and stored on computer hard disks are often copied and used again later on similar occasions with due alterations. When, for example, dates are

changed in this way it is easy to overlook the ordinal suffix and just change the figure.

However, even if, to take an example, there is thus a considerable number of deviant forms in the material for the ordinals of 50 (1290 for *50st*, 300 for *50nd* and 936 for *50rd*), it is obvious that they represent only a tiny fraction of all the ordinals of 50. A table showing the proportions of the different types of ordinals is therefore called for. This is Table 2.

The table shows interestingly that in the cases where the ordinal normally ends in *-th* there is very little disturbance of that pattern: *-th* forms regularly represent between 99% and 100%. On the other hand, in the cases where the ordinals normally end in *-st*, *-nd* and *-rd*, those

forms, although still very frequent, are clearly less frequent than *-th* forms in the *-th* category. Here, *-st* forms range from 97.1% to 98.5% in the regular *-st* category, *-nd* forms from 96.5% to 98.1% in the regular *-nd* category and *-rd* forms from 96.0% to 98.2% in the regular *-rd* category. There is some mutual interference between those suffix forms, but by far the greatest influence is that of *-th* forms on that of the others. When there is deviation from the canonical pattern it therefore normally takes the form of *-th* forms intruding into the purviews of the others rather than the other way round. In other words, ordinals like *23th* are much more frequent than ordinals like *24rd*.

The conclusions we can draw from this little

exercise are two. First, the deviations from the established order that we do find are almost entirely as we might have expected them to be, viz. as analogical formations based on the overwhelmingly most frequent variant of the ordinal morpheme, *-th*. Secondly, despite such indications to the contrary, the traditional system of English ordinals is very stable. The “indications to the contrary” stand out as exceptions, precisely because the system is so well established. ■

#### Note

1 Webster = Gove, Philip Babcock (ed.) 1971. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*. Springfield, Mass.: Merriam.