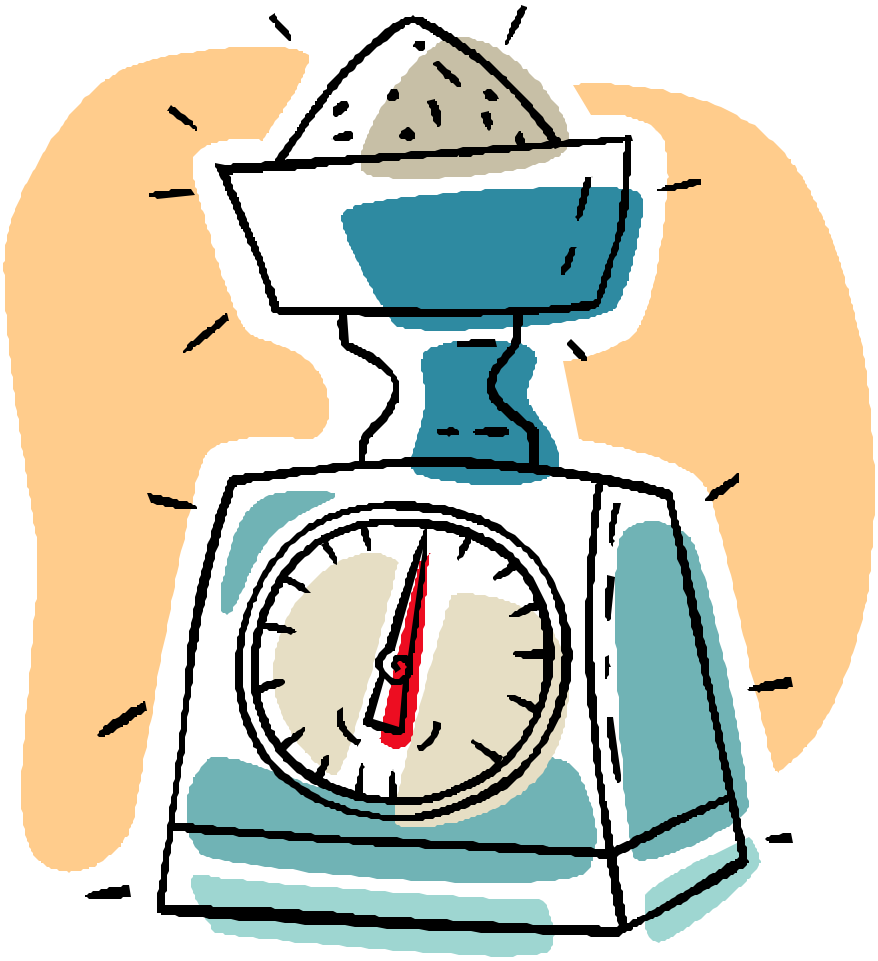

Stupid Interpreter Tricks

Measure for measure

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Mass, Weight and Pressure

MY THUMB TOLD ME the bicycle balloon tire was properly inflated, but the needle on the air gauge at the Ipanema gas station read under 2 instead of over 25. Sure enough the thing was calibrated wrong—instead of PSI it showed some goofy kgf/cm² units—obviously a typo, right? Nowadays, eons later, engineers still insist on abbreviating kilogram with an "f"—at least sometimes—and it turns out they have their reasons.

We know from science fiction that mass isn't the same as weight, yet Americans so often hear that kilos convert to pounds when multiplied by 2.2 that many come to believe it. Not so in Great Britain, where engineers first divide their pounds by the acceleration of gravity, converting them to slugs, then convert from slugs to kilos by multiplying by 14.6. Asked to explain, they'll reply that unit force is a force that causes a unit acceleration when applied to a unit mass—by their lights that settles the issue. At any rate, the mysterious "f" indicates that the kilogram is being treated as a unit of actual weight or force.

In France—metric before it became fashionable—the British definition of unit force is accepted. But when it comes down to cases, French engineers sprinkle salt on British slugs and specify tire inflation in bars or kPa. A bar has nothing to do with the Demon Rum. It is an expression people use to refer to atmospheric pressure, 14 psi, when they don't much care to be understood. A kPa is 1000 pascals, each one of them named after the French mathematician Blaise Pascal—the gambling man who invented Pascal's triangle. Pascal would perhaps have attached deep significance to this procession of 14s: 14 psi being atmospheric pressure at sea level, while there are 14.6 slugs to the kilo, and 0.14 psi to the kilopascal—and the coincidence is certainly convenient for linguists doing conversions.

These different units are built out of several other units defined in terms of their corresponding yardsticks, but the fundamental dimensions underlying all units of measure are the same in every case. Units of pressure are always units of force divided by units of area. Units of area are always length multiplied by length, or L^2. Units of force are everywhere units of mass times length divided by time times time, or ML/T^2. Units of pressure in America, France or England must therefore be M/LT^2 in every case; the differences arising only from the various ways of constructing the units of mass, length and time. So next time your deadline pressure increases your blood pressure as you convert from British engineering pressure to metric, take comfort in the certainty that your source and target pressures will always have the same fundamental dimensions, and that mass, weight and pressure can always be reduced to mass, length and time. ★

Are you eXPerienced?

by Frank Dietz © 2002
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BY NOW, YOU SHOULD'VE NOTICED that the minions of Bill the Mighty have a new operating system on the market: Windows XP (which comes in two flavors: Home and Professional). I have used XP Home for a few months and wanted to share some impressions.

You have to activate it. If you upgrade to XP or install it on a newly built computer, you have to activate it within 30 days by phone, modem or on a website. I chose the phone option and had to enter a 25-digit code by touch-tone phone, after which a computer voice read me an 80-digit (!) code that I had to type into a field on my computer, and that was it – no name or address had to be given. Note that a major hardware upgrade (new CPU etc.) could force you to re-activate. On my new laptop, by the way, XP was already activated.

The GUI was designed by 4-year-olds. And they used crayons. Big ones! Lots of colors, too! At least you can change the Start menu by right-clicking on the Start button and selecting *Properties/Start menu/Classic Start menu. You can also right-click on the screen, and then* select *Properties/Themes/Windows Classic* to reduce the crayola overload.

Compatibility may be an issue. If you have older software or hardware, it might not work well (or at all) with XP. Microsoft has been issuing compatibility updates (http://v4.windowsupdate.microsoft.com/en/default.asp) for software, and you should check the website of your hardware or software manufacturer for XP patches. Just don't expect too much for that 10-year-old printer of yours. You can also check Microsoft's compatibility list at http://www.microsoft.com/hcl/ .Trados, by the way, has just issued an upgrade version (5.5) to offer full XP compatibility for Trados Freelance Edition.

Some nifty new features. The System Restore function lets you "roll back" the system to a point before something bad (e.g. the installation of a driver that made your system unstable) happened. The Network Setup Wizard makes it easy to create a home network, even with computers running older versions of Windows.

Stability. Many users have commented on this, and I also found XP very stable – no BSOD (Blue Screen of Death) so far!

The verdict: If you have a Windows 98 or ME system that is running reasonably stable, don't change it. If you are getting a new system with Windows XP pre-installed, make sure it has at least 256 MB of RAM – XP extends the porcine proclivities of the operating systems from Redmond.★

Bargains for the Next Depression

NORTH AUSTIN'S DIVERSIFICATION INTO HIGH-TECH INDUSTRY following the Crash of 1987 has made this a relatively easy place to keep computers and peripherals up and running. A secondary market in used computer parts, manuals and software has become as essential to translators as the used book market. M. C. Howard Electronics at 9417 Neils Thompson Drive has for two decades been a mecca for hackers and technicians looking for hard drives, EEPROMs, memory chips and other components at bargain prices. More recently, Discount Electronics, now over on Anderson Lane just west of the railroad tracks, has offered some great deals on mice, keyboards, software, drives and knickknacks.

Goodwill Industries (Goodwill Computer Works) has also found itself a niche market disassembling and rebuilding donated computers. If something breaks on a computer that is more than a year old, you stand a good chance of finding a replacement there. For network cards, monitors and cables they simply cannot be beat, and some of their components even come backed by a guarantee -- albeit measured in hours, not months. It helps to be able to spot broken and defective items and avoid them in the first place if you're going to be shopping at junkyards.

More upscale yet still economical is Valiant Computers at the southwest corner of Burnet Road and 183 North. This is a small store selling late-model motherboards, cases, drives, memory and peripherals at discount-chain bargain prices. Their personnel are technically competent, and the company has a very agreeable repairs and exchange policy. All of the places mentioned here will sell you a complete system or any part thereof.

These are just some examples of Austin's lesser-known attractions for technology-tied professionals. The University campus area is a constantly shifting hotbed of recycled computer activity, and I have seen a number of economy outlets come and go on the south side and downtown. AATIA members from other towns who travel here for meetings will find an unusually large selection of computer-related bargains.

—J. Henry Phillips ★