

A Joke, stereotypes and communication.

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ABSTRACT

The paper tells a joke and discusses what that means about us as programmers and how we interact with programming languages and colleagues across the industry.

THE JOKE

A woman asks her husband, a programmer, to go to the shop and buy a loaf of bread and if they have eggs buy a dozen.

The man comes back with 12 loaves of bread.

STEREOTYPES

This joke depicts a number of stereotypes that are worth considering.

Firstly, I find that joke funny. – I fit the stereotype that finds jokes like this funny. When I was at school, I wondered if there was some form of normal which I should aspire to, however as I have grown up I have accepted who I am and I enjoy sharing geeky jokes with people who have similar interests, I also enjoy learning different perspectives from those with different interests.

Secondly, in the joke, the programmer is a man. – I think that stereotypically programmers are men, although I am a female programmer, so do not fit this stereotype. Culturally we form expectations based on gender, however as a person I feel more defined by my maths degree than by my gender.

Finally, the programmer is married. – I tend to think of a stereotypical programmer as single, although I am also married and know very few single programmers. I don't think this is particularly relevant information about colleagues, however it's nice to chat about families and interests with colleagues and helps in understanding their point of view.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is very important within our industry and this joke highlights several things we need to consider when communicating.

Communication in our industry happens in many forms:

With fellow programmers

- Some who are new to the role
- Some who have been in the role for many years
- Some who started out in different industries

With programming languages

- SAS ®
- S-Plus ®
- R

With colleagues in different departments

- Statistics
- Medical writing
- Data management
- Regulatory
- Outsourcing

With regulatory authorities

- FDA
- EMA
- PMDA

These are just a few and they all require consideration to make sure we ask the right questions and convey the right meanings.

DOZEN

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We work in an international industry and need to consider our language for words and phrases which may be local or colloquial, as these can cause confusion. This may be with colleagues from different places or regulatory authorities who have a different first language to us.

In the joke dozen means 12, although the British also have a term "baker's dozen" which means 13, where bakers would add in an extra item to make sure that the dozen reached the minimum weight which was legally required for baked goods.

I was recently on a plane where the ground crew noticed some minor cosmetic damage, engineers were summoned to confirm it was only minor, after their inspection and confirmation that our plane was fine, the captain spoke over the radio to let us know all was fine and we were just waiting for paperwork, the captain used the phrase "tying up loose ends" which in English means finishing off the last few things, I wondered if this was internationally friendly language and it seems the cabin crew agreed with me, as soon after the captain's message a member of the cabin crew came on the radio to assure us that the plane was absolutely fine and we were just waiting for paperwork. After about half an hour I heard some people behind me discussing how paperwork could take that long, and thought about how different industries have different expectations for paperwork and safety requirements.

I find dates and times to interesting internationally, as I would refer to the first day of PhUSE as 8th October 2017, however my American colleagues would say October 8th 2017 and if we used the numerical month 10 rather than the word, this becomes very confusing very quickly, so soon after starting to work with American colleagues I started to use 3 letter months rather than 2 digit months.

For times, I would say this paper is being presented at 1.30pm, but agenda says 13:30, and more casually I would say half past 1, while directly translating German would give half to 2.

So even something as seemingly simple as when you will have a meeting may need careful discussion so all are expecting the same thing.

PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES

SAS (and other programming languages) think like the programmer in the joke, we need to use precise language to get the results we want.

I once wrote code of this form:

```
data phuse1 ;
  length var $17 ;
  var='drug a' ;
  output ;
  var='drug b' ;
  output ;
  var='drug a and drug b' ;
  output ;
run ;
data _null_ ;
  set phuse1 ;
  if index(var, 'drug a')>0 then put 'a' ;
  else if index(var, 'drug b')>0 then put 'b' ;
  else if index(var, 'drug a and drug b')>0 then put 'a/b' ;
run ;
```

Which as soon as I looked at the log, showed that I had not asked the right question of SAS.

```
87 data _null_ ;
88 set phuse1 ;
89 if index(var, 'drug a')>0 then put 'a' ;
90 else if index(var, 'drug b')>0 then put 'b' ;
91 else if index(var, 'drug a and drug b')>0 then put 'a/b' ;
92 run ;
```

```
a
b
a
```

NOTE: There were 3 observations read from the data set WORK.PHUSE1.

NOTE: DATA statement used (Total process time):

```
real time          0.04 seconds
cpu time           0.00 seconds
```

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This could be fixed as:

```
data _null_ ;
  set phusel ;
  if index(var, 'drug a and drug b')>0 then put 'a/b' ;
  else if index(var, 'drug a')>0 then put 'a' ;
  else if index(var, 'drug b')>0 then put 'b' ;
run ;
```

COLLEAGUES ACROSS THE INDUSTRY

“Normal” people think like the wife in the joke and so when we receive requests, we should think about what is wanted and follow up with any uncertainties before putting effort into something that may not be useful.

I currently work in oncology and often get asked for outputs of progression, this always requires follow up as we have investigator progression and independent assessor progression.

Please can you calculate the average age in the study, is not clear whether the mean or the median (or maybe the mode) is required.

I received a request from a colleague in Japan asking for a listing of ADRs, within our local term we use the term ADR (adverse drug reaction) to mean a small list of AEs (adverse events) of special interest, however when we sent a listing of these events it became clear that what was actually required was a listing of all AEs.

When I first started in the industry I found the number of abbreviations and initialisations overwhelming and kept a piece of paper on my desk adding each new one I came across, so I try to be careful about how I use them as things that are second nature to me now were like a foreign language a few* years ago. (*for large values of a few)

Thinking about abbreviations I still haven't worked out why I pronounce SAP (statistical analysis plan) as a single word but SOP (standard operating procedure) as each of the 3 letters.

I once sent an email “I have produced this using COVAR1D, please let me know if you have any questions or need any changes.” This was quickly followed with a response from my programming lead which said “Sarah has used the collected baseline laboratory values for the groupings in this report, let us know if you would like us to use the investigator flags from randomization instead.”

MORE JOKES

I can't miss the opportunity to share some more jokes, especially maths jokes which have a very select audience. There are 3 types of mathematician, those who can count and those who can't.

There is a bar full of functions, $\sin x$, $\cos x$, x^2 , $1/x$.

All alone in a corner sits e , the barman goes over and asks: “why don't you integrate?”
 e (sadly) responds: “it wouldn't make any difference.”

My favourite joke for the non-maths crowd:

Did you hear the joke about the magic tractor?
It went down the road and turned into a field.

Following this back to communication, there is what some call an “international test” for jokes and this involves telling a joke to an international audience and seeing if the joke works.

When I was at university we told the joke:

A man walks into a bar

Ouch!

Our Italian friend followed with:

A man walks into a Café.

Pluff!

This did not pass the international test.

CONCLUSION

It is important to know your audience and yourself when communicating, as you can cause a lot of confusion and unnecessary work by not using language which is clear and appropriate for the audience it is intended for.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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