

Correspondence

DEAR EDITOR,

David Singmaster [1] mentions a notation which is likely to confuse, where the decimal point is (ab)used as a sexagesimal point. I would like to raise a matter which I happen to think is important, and which could lead to confusion.

I have noted that number terminology can be incorrectly used, in school or teachers' textbooks, sometimes in advanced material. It used to be the case that separate sets of words were used for integers and fractions in different bases: for instance, base-ten integers were described as denary numbers, and base-ten radix fractions as decimals. I don't recall seeing the word 'denary' being used in recent material, and I have noted references to 'binary fractions', 'bicimal fractions', and 'ternary-fractions', where I would argue that the correct words would be 'dimidial' and 'tertia'. (I appreciate that it can be correct to refer to binary floating-point fractions in the context of computers, which can only represent numbers as signed integers, or pairs etc. of signed integers.) It's important to recognise what sort of numbers you are dealing with, and use different words or phrases to refer to them as necessary.

I don't mourn the days when one could not graduate in mathematics, or any other discipline, without having passed Latin in the School Certificate or the General Certificate of Education. However, other disciplines are aware that, because of the use of Latin and Greek in scientific nomenclature, it is worthwhile taking some trouble to get your classical derivations right [2]. I was not permitted to pass on to the GCE Ordinary level course in Latin, never mind take the examination, but I find that a few books tell me all the Latin I need [3, 4].

References

1. D. Singmaster, Some decimal points, *Math. Gaz.* **81** (November 1997) pp. 422-423.
2. W. S. Stearns, *Botanical Latin*, Cambridge University Press. (A standard reference work for biological taxonomists.)
3. Benjamin Hall Kennedy, *The shorter Latin primer*, revised by Sir James Mountford. Longman (1962).
4. Benjamin Hall Kennedy, *The revised Latin primer*, edited and further revised by J. J. Mountford. Longmans Green (1941).

Yours sincerely,

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