Structured programming,
programming teaching and
the language Pascal

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1 - Introduction

This paper is a series of considerations on the three subjects stated in its title, and on their mutual relationships. Since it is a survey of the present situation in three related and evolving areas, references play a very important role. A rather extensive bibliography is thus appended to this text, and more than doubles its length.

The structure of this paper may be very simply inferred from its title: the three subjects a, b, c are examined first separately, then two by two and finally all three at once, according to the scheme:

a - b - c - ab - ac - bc - abc

2 - Structured programming

Even if we give to this somewhat fuzzy term a wider signification than is customary, this subject was still unknown a few years ago, and has today a crucial importance. Is it only a fashionable topic, or does it correspond to a real need? If a need, it is a very recent one, and some meritorious books on programming risk to be rapidly obsolete because of its importance. Even Knuth's magnum opus [Knu68,Knu69,Knu73a] is not completely irreproachable from this aspect.

To see how much mentalities have changed, it is sufficient to browse among the Collected algorithms of the A.C.M. or the algorithms published by the Computer Journal: for example, see [Flo62] (which is a pathological case), [Sin68] or even more recently [Woo70]. Books also give instructive examples, as in [Har71] or [Dav73]. Weinberg's books [Wei70,Wei71] present symptoms of a change, but still rather slight.

The oldest papers are concerned by proofs of algorithms and axiomatisation of programming; it is only recently that these matters have been related to structured programming [Nau66,Flo67,MCP67,Bur69,Hoa69,Ars71,FoH71, ClH72,Gri72,Lon72,Hoa72b,Hoa72c,Hoa73a,MNV73]. The goto controversy, because of its theoretical and paradoxical aspects, produced many papers following Dijkstra's celebrated letter to the editor of the Communications [Dij68a,Ric68,AsM71, Wul71,KnF71,Lea72,Hop72,Wul72,Ars72,Boc73,NaS73, PKT73]. The necessity for structured programming and its practical usage are advocated in more and more papers [Dij68b,Dij69,Nau69,Bau71,Mil71,Woo71, Wir71a,Dij72a,Hes72,BrH72,Hoa72a,Hoa72d,Nau72, Wir72c,DaH72,Bak72,Dij72b,Bro73,ClH73,Lec73,Sha73,

ShW73]. The first books have at last just been published [DDH72,Wir73,WMY73,ChC73]. In every meeting related to programming, these different aspects take great importance, even if they were not planned in the programme [ACM71,IFIP72,ACM73]. However, some of the most fundamental ideas are far from being new, since they were exposed by Polyà [Pol48], who found them (in part) in the works of Bolzano, Descartes and even Pappus of Alexandria.

The major ideas that we group under the heading of structured programming comprise: complete or partial banishment of the goto statement, by the way of logical constructs with nested structure; a novel approach to modularity; construction of programs by stepwise refinement; top-down programming; analytic verification or proof of correctness of algorithms; and the use in program construction of a strict but freely accepted discipline.

3 - Programming teaching

This is an up-to-date subject, but also a controversial one. The different curricula which have been proposed for teaching computer science [ACM68,Baz69,Las72,AuE73] contradict each other, about the whole subject and especially about the teaching of programming. The working conference sponsored by IFIP to examine this one subject [IFIP72] saw the proposition of just about all possible solutions.

The most important reason for differences in opinion is probably the confusion between a programming language and programming (or even computer science). This confusion is maintained by employers, who request that people master the language they will use on their computer, and by the specialized institutes who seriously promise wonderful wages after three weeks of a programming course by correspondence.

Even if people agree really to teach programming (this does not seem evident when we see how much the ACM curriculum for small colleges [AuE73] moves back compared to Curriculum 68 [ACM68]), the quarrel focuses around the precise language used: a pedagogical or a real one, a machine or a high-level one, a powerful or a restrictive one, all possible combinations are proposed, and often well justified [Ada72,Lec72, Org72,Pec72,VdP72,Wei72,Wor72,Hol73]. Even if we decide to use an existing high-level language, the most currently accepted solution, must we choose it because of the number of people using

it daily, or independently of this?

4 - The language Pascal

This programming language has a surprising
history, which puts it apart from its celebrated
predecessors and contemporaries. It is a very re-
cent language [Wir70], officially described in the
first number of a new non-American journal [Wir71b],
by a quite difficult paper, so condensed that one
must find the newest aspects of the language
"between the lines" (Haberman [Hab73] makes a
spiteful and unfair criticism of Pascal because
he was not able to read the report in such a way).
It is not the work of a users' group, nor of an
international committee, nor of an important com-
puter manufacturer. The first implementation
[Wir71c,Wir72b] was done on a costly and not wide-
spread machine, using a method which seems a pri-
ori worrying. No useful implementation is pre-
sently available on an IBM machine. The language
revision, made after two years of use [Wir72a,
WiJ73], includes no extension, no new feature,
and even suppresses some details, which seems a
unique case in the history of programming langua-
ges.

All these facts seemed to sentence the lan-
guage to a definitive obscurity. In fact, it has
already a descendance [C1H71,IRH73,Jen73,McK73,
Des74], and one says "Pascal-like language" as
one said "Algol-like language". Numerous imple-
mentations are in progress [Des73,ThM73,Lyn73] or
already completed [WeQ72]. During the Sigplan-
Sigops interface workshop [ACM73], Pascal was the
most quoted language. It is probably the only
programming language of comparable power whose
formal semantic description uses only twenty-six
typed pages [HoW72] (compare to those of PL/1
[IBM69] or even Basic [Lee72]).

Pascal still has some weaknesses, which seem
to arise especially from the fact that its author
did not want to make its definition grow bigger
with ill-formalized features, too machine-depen-
dent or operating system-dependent, or too expen-
sive to implement. The major reason for Pascal's
success seems to be the fact that it corresponds
exactly to what Dijkstra [Dij72b] requires: "I
see a great future for very systematic and very
modest programming languages."

5 - Teaching of structured programming

The question is not to teach structured pro-
gramming as a particular programming technique,
alongside other techniques, but to make it the
basis of a programming course. The course des-
criptions which use this notion [Wei72,Ros72,
Ros73] are however somewhat fuzzy about this
point. They are rather courses "about program-
ming" (as Rosin says), where a series of methods,
habits and rules of behavior are taught.

These courses are often offered at an advan-
ced level, i.e. to the few best students, as if
one said: "Let us begin by giving people bad
habits, then we shall correct them for people who
deserve it". However, in an interval of a few
months, there have been published the latest de-
velopment of Dijkstra's celebrated "Notes"
[Dij72a], and above all Wirth's book [Wir72c,
Wir73], which both suggest making structured pro-
gramming the basis of programming teaching.

This seems to be evident: if we are con-
vinced that it is not only efficient and useful

[Bak72], but even necessary if we do not want to
fall into catastrophe [Dij72b], we must teach
structured programming to everybody (even to those
people who seem to be unrecoverable), immediately,
and as soon as at the beginning of programming
teaching.

6 - The language Pascal and structured programming

Is it possible to write structured programs
(this has not to be confused with programming in
a structured way) in any language? The answer is
certainly no, and this has already been said se-
veral times [WGW71,Pec72,C1H73,Hol73]. However,
if we eliminate the machine languages, Cobol and
Fortran (there exists however, what is hardly
credible, an attempt of extension to Fortran to
allow structured programming [Mil73]), the differ-
ent points of view begin to diverge. Many people
indeed are interested only in structuring the pro-
gram itself, and forget the data. The debate is
then centered around that "obscene goto" (Laski
in [IFIP72]), that "forbidden fruit" [Wei72], and
on the means to prevent the programmer from using
it, by completely removing it [C1H71,WRH71] or
hiding from him that it exists [Wei72,Hol73]. To
replace the goto, the most tricky and unnatural
methods are used [C1H71,WRH71,Ars72,IRH73,Boc73],
a fact which proves that the true question was
left aside, and that people remain influenced by
flowcharts [NAS73] and Fortran, since after having
ignominously driven away the goto they try to re-
introduce it in concealment.

However, the question of data structuring is
equally important, and Hoare's papers [Hoa72a,
Hoa72c] deal with it in a probably final way. The
greatest strength of the language Pascal is pre-
cisely to be suggested by [Hoa72a], and to have
borrowed from it all that can be realized at a
moderate cost (the language LIS alone [IRH73]
seems to go a step further in that sense). Be-
sides that, the language offers the statement
structures identified as necessary (if...then...
else, while...do and the compound statement) or
useful (repeat...until and for...do). As for the
goto, it is present, even if in an ultra-restric-
tive form: only this statement (at least pre-
sently) allows a clear processing of error situa-
tions [Lan66,Lea72,Hop72], without using such
powerful and complicated tools as the ones pro-
posed for exit from nested constructs. In fact,
the language Pascal, despite its simplicity (or
better, because of it), supplies one with all the
tools necessary for structured programming, if
one is not the slave of flowcharts and not (or no
longer) infected by Fortran [Lec73].

7 - The language Pascal and programming teaching

Laski [Las72] gave the best reasons for
teaching programming using an algorithmic lan-
guage, or rather to teach the development of al-
gorithms and their expression by means of a pro-
gramming language (we paraphrase): "Very few
computers are von Neumann machines. Very few
programs are written in machine language. A pro-
gramming language has an a priori meaning; its
translation into machine language does not give
it an a posteriori meaning, it has only to be
correct. Numerical analysis is not computer
science. The object of computer science is to
represent, store, retrieve, transform and inter-
pret some information."

The advantage of Pascal, in these circum-
stances, is that it is machine-independent, but
not too much: it never refers to the manner in
which information is represented in memory, but
it allows this to be done reasonably. Besides
that, its principal advantage is that it is a
simple and concise language, of which the clear
and complete description, illustrated by examples,
occupies less than a hundred pages. This is the
only way for the programming language not to be
the subject of the course but only its support,
and one has only to browse through some of the
innumerable books of introduction to programming,
to see that by using Fortran or a subset (even a
tiny one) of PL/I, this goal can never be attain-
ed.

It is evident that Pascal is not a language
for doing everything, but its qualities make it
usable in a great variety of problems (and not
only in numerical calculations), with fair effi-
ciency, and without frustrating restrictions
[Lec72]. As Peck says [Pec72], "it is particu-
larly distressing to think of the vast unfortu-
nate herd of programmers whose only means of com-
munication with the computer is the Fortran lan-
guage".

8 - Teaching structured programming with the
      language Pascal

Structured programming must be taught at the
time of the initiation to computer science, and
the language Pascal is an excellent support for
such a course. Is there a better choice? Holt
[Hol73] is favourable to Pascal, but cannot use
it and deems it to be too young; he is consequent-
ly reduced to the "fatal disease" [Dij72b], that
is PL/I, which he tries to make innocuous thank
to innumerable cuts. Weinberg, on the other hand,
preaches the use of PL/I as a universal language
[Wei70]. Besides the fact that a universal lan-
guage is evidently a fruitless lure, it is parti-
cularly informing to compare his books [Wei70,
WMY73] with Wirth's [Wir72c,Wir73], who evidently
advocates the use of Pascal. Whereas the name of
the language used as a support in the Wirth's
book is quoted once only, in a footnote, a very
short syntactic description being put in an ap-
pendix, in [WMY73] it is not only the name of
the language used which appears in the title, but
moreover the name of the precise compiler that
must be used! This simple fact seems very signi-
ficant of the difference of approach between the
two books: while one can forget Pascal and con-
centrate on programming itself, this is completely
impossible with PL/I.

Aside from the programming language, the
teaching of these two books is easily condensed.
Contrary to the opinion of most professional pro-
grammers, a good program is the result of 5% ins-
piration and 95% perspiration. The best means
to obtain an error-free program is to manage to
not put them into it, since if program testing
may be used to show the presence of bugs, it can
never prove their absence [Dij69,Dij72b,Wir73].
There is no miracle recipe, and the only thing
to do is to work in a systematic manner and to
apply the methods identified as good in other
areas [Pol48,Nau69,Nau72].

9 - Bibliography
Under the reference abbreviation, we give
(when it is available) the reference to the
review in Computing Reviews, with the format:
(year) volume, number, or to a review paper quo-
ted in this bibliography.

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