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Jan MOENS *

MASS (IN G) *VERSUS* WEIGHT (IN N)

When being asked ‘What is the size of your feet?’, an average Belgian man would probably answer ‘42’, an American ‘9’, a Japanese ‘26.5’, etc. ^[1]. While none of them would specify the unit in which the size is expressed, it is obvious that all of them used a different one. We should thus not blame them for making an error since their answers most probably would not lead to misunderstandings, at least in their own country. Or should we? Well, as a matter of fact, we should, because strictly spoken none of them has correctly answered the question: we were inquiring about the size of their *feet*, not of their *shoes*. There is obviously a straightforward correlation between both sizes, but physically speaking, the two characteristics (feet *versus* shoes) are of course not the same, nor are the units in which they are expressed identical. Limiting the example to the Belgian, he would probably express the size of his feet in cm, whereas the size of his shoes is expressed in an obsolete French unit called ‘*points de Paris*’ ^[2].

The point we want to make by using this example is the following: when talking about physical characteristics, and their value, it is essential to use on the one hand, the correct definition or description, and on the other, the correct unit to express its value. How does this relate to numismatics, or more precisely, to coins? One of the most important characteristics of coins has been and still is their weight, especially as long as the coin’s purchasing power was determined by the quantity of precious metal it contained. So, what is the problem?

Since Newton formulated his fundamental laws on physics in 1687 ^[3], we know that the weight of a coin is in fact the strength of the force – we since then call gravity – that is exercised on it and which depends on the masses of the two bodies attracting each other (*in casu* the coin and Earth) and on the distance between the centers of gravity of the two bodies; as the mass of the Earth and this distance is (roughly) the same wherever we would weigh a coin, the weight of a coin (or any other object, for that matter), is given by the simplified formula $m \times g$, with m the mass of the object in (kilo)gram and g the acceleration it is undergoing in the gravitational field of our planet and which amounts to 9.81 m/sec².

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^[1] Note that in some cases, women use still other values for feet having the same size as those of men.

^[2] For the sake of completeness: the conversion formula is: number of ‘*points de Paris*’ = (number of cm of the foot + 1) \times 1.5, and then round up to the nearest multiple of 0.5.

^[3] We know since Einstein that Newton’s theory on gravity was not completely correct, but for all practical purposes, his approach can be applied to the weight of coins. Note that Newton became warden in 1696 and in 1699 master of the Royal Mint in London, so he was actively involved in the ‘Great Recoinage’ of English coins at the end of the 17th c., and the correct weight/mass of coins must have been one of his daily concerns.

Hence the unit in which physicists express weight is ‘kg × m/sec²’, also called ‘newton’ (word not capitalized but abbreviated as N). In other words, the *mass* of a coin is expressed in kg (or g which is a more practical unit for coins) but not its *weight*. Can we blame numismatists for having used ‘since the beginning of times’ gram instead of newton for specifying weights? Hardly so. The decimal system that introduced (*i.a.*) the gram is one of the major achievements of the French Revolution, but nevertheless the first monetary law of the new French Republic (of 7 April 1795) used it for the weight (*‘poids’*) instead of the mass (*‘masse’*) of her coins, thus starting a long series of erroneous uses that still continue today. As a matter of fact, when looking at the official document specifying the characteristics of the euro coins ^[4] – and whatever one’s opinion might be about the euro, this document is historically important, so one might expect it to have been drafted with the utmost care – we notice that in all its 23 linguistic versions, the weights are expressed in ‘gram’ ^[5], which is wrong and should be replaced by ‘newton’, or what seems to be a more practical correction, the word ‘weight’ is wrong and should be replaced by the word ‘mass’.

At one of the first international numismatic congresses organized at a time when the INC did not yet exist, *viz.* in 1910, a resolution was approved ^[6] to prefer the French term *‘droit’* over *‘avers’* for the obverse of a coin. So, maybe time has come for the INC to promote the physically correct use of ‘mass’ instead of ‘weight’ while keeping the gram as the proper unit, by voting a resolution in that sense at its next International Congress (note that the RBN has already been using the term ‘mass’ with the unit g for its articles in French and Dutch since several years). In this way, numismatists would show that they respect and integrate into their work (which is increasingly multidisciplinary) concepts and notions used by other disciplines than their own, as they have already done for statistics, metallurgy, monetary economics, dendrology, etc., so why not also for ‘pure physics’...

^[4] Council Regulation (EC) No. 975/98 of 3 May 1998 ‘on denominations and technical specifications of euro coins intended for circulation’, published in the Official Journal of the European Communities of 11 May 1998, p. L 139/6–8; latest recast is Council Regulation (EC) No. 729/2014 of 24 June 2014, published in the Official Journal of the European Union of 2 July 2014, p. L 194/1–7.

^[5] In fact, 12 versions use the abbreviation ‘g’ for gram (as prescribed by the International System of Units), 4 use ‘gr’ (or rp in the case of Bulgarian), 1 uses ‘gr.’, while the remaining 6 do not use an abbreviation. It is, to say the least, a bit bizarre that one of the European Institutions, which are usually so keen on imposing norms and standards to which a whole series of products have to comply, sometimes uses ‘gr(.)’ to abbreviate ‘grams’, as the latter form is usually reserved for abbreviating ‘grains’.

^[6] A. de Witte & V. Tourneur, *Procès-verbaux et Mémoires du Congrès international de Numismatique et d’Art de la Médaille contemporaine, tenu à Bruxelles les 26, 27, 28 et 29 juin 1910*, p. xciii. This congress was co-organized by the *Société Royale de Numismatique de Belgique* and the *Société hollandaise-belge des Amis de la Médaille d’Art*.