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In mid-1950s, computer programmers across the Atlantic (members of the West-German GAMM and the American ACM) agreed on joining forces to design a new and better, indeed universal, language for programming computers. From the start, the opinion was voiced that this new language should be ‘as close as possible to the mathematical notation’. While this requirement sounds natural in view of the use of the phrase mathematical machines to denote computers, it seems less natural when the profession of early programmers is taken into account: engineers, astronomers, and physicists. However, mathematics was probably the common language of them all.

In order to understand better the choice of programming language to be similar to mathematical notation, I will shortly turn back to the beginning of the 20th century to show how the development of mathematics as such as well as the development of the international mathematical community contributed to the special position of the mathematical notation, and hence also its ‘only natural’ usefulness for computer programming. (Received September 16, 2012)