Character Encoding

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Motivation

8-bit encodings
Unicode
Misc

(credit: https://serpstat.com/blog/how-to-set-the-site-encoding-correctly/)
Hello world

01001000 01100101 01101100 01101100 01101111 00100000
01010111 01101111 01110010 01101100 01100100

01010111 01101111 01110010 01101100 01100100
• Recall the binary and hexadecimal system and convert first few binary octets to their hexadecimal representation.
Introduction
• ASCII
• 8-bit extensions
• Unicode
• and some related topics:
  • end of line
  • byte-order mark
  • alternative solution to character encoding – escaping
Problem statement

• Today’s computers use binary digits
• No natural relation between numbers and characters of an alphabet $\implies$ convention needed
• No convention $\implies$ chaos
• Too many conventions $\implies$ chaos
• (recall A. S. Tanenbaum: *The nice thing about standards is that you have so many to choose from.*)
Btw why binary computers?

• the answer is actually not that straightforward
• three distinct voltage values certainly possible too (experimental ternary computers assembled in 1950s), as well as any other higher base
• mostly physical and electro-technical reasons, rather than mathematical or information-theoretical reasons:
  • two voltage values technically very easy to distinguish – basically just charge vs. no charge opposition on a transistor’s gate (and hence it is fast)
  • only very simple circuitry needed for two-valued logic (and hence it is fast)
Basic notions – Character

a character

• is an abstract notion, not something tangible
• has no numerical representation nor graphical form
• e.g. “capital A with grave accent”
• you need an encoding to associate a character with a numerical representation
• you need a font to associate a character with a concrete visual realization
a character set (or a character repertoire)
• a set of logically distinct characters
• relevant for a certain purpose (e.g., used in a given language or in group of languages)
• not necessarily related to computers

a coded character set:
• a unique number (typically non-negative integer) assigned to each character: code point
• relevant for a certain purpose (e.g., used in a given language or in group of languages)
• not necessarily related to computers
• a glyph – a visual representation of a character
• a font – a set of glyphs of characters
character encoding

• the way how (coded) characters are mapped to (sequences of) bytes
• both in the declarative and procedural sense
  • a conversion table
  • a conversion process
8-bit encodings
• In the beginning there was the Word. And the Word was encoded in 7-bit ASCII. (well, if we ignore the history before 1950’s)
• ASCII = American Standard Code for Information Interchange (1963)
  • 7 bits (0–127)
  • 33 control characters (0–31,127) such as Escape, Line Feed, Bell
  • the remaining 95 characters (32–126): printable characters such as space, numerals, upper and lower case characters.
- now with decimal and octal codes (credit: www.pragimtech.com)

### ASCII Table

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Exercise

Given that A’s code point in ASCII is 65, and a’s code point is 97.

- What is the binary representation of ’A’ in ASCII? (and what’s its hexadecimal representation)
- What is the binary representation of ’a’ in ASCII?

Is it clear now why there are the special characters inserted between upper and lower case letters?
• ASCII’s main advantage – simplicity: one character – one byte
• ASCII’s main disadvantage – no way to represent national alphabets
• Anyway, ASCII is one of the most successful software standards ever developed!
How to represent the end of line

- "newline" == "end of line" == "EOL"
- ASCII symbols LF (line feed, 0x0A) and/or CR (carriage return, 0x0D), depending on the operation system:
  - LF is used in UNIX systems
  - CR+LF used in Microsoft Windows
  - CR used in Mac OS
A "how-many" question

• ASCII is clearly not enough for Czech
• but how many additional characters do we actually need for Czech?
Another "how-many" question

How many questions would be needed if we want to keep several languages in the same code space?

• find pieces of text from the following languages: Czech, French, German, Spanish, Greek, Icelandic, Russian (at least a few paras for each)
• store them into plain text files
• count how many different signs in total appear in the files
• try to solve it using only a bash command pipeline (hint: you may use e.g. 'grep -o .' or sed 's/./&\n/g')
8-bit encodings

- Supersets of ASCII, using octets 128–255 (still keeping the 1 character – 1 byte relation)
- West European Languages: ISO 8859-1 (ISO Latin 1)
- For Czech and other Central/East European languages: anarchy
  - ISO 8859-2 (ISO Latin 2)
  - Windows 1250
  - KOI-8
  - Brothers Kamenický
  - other proprietary “standards” by IBM, Apple etc.
How to inspect the raw content of a file?

- The encoding of a text file must be known in order to display the text correctly.
- Is there an encoding-less way to view a file?
- Yes, you can view the hexadecimal codes of characters: `hexdump -C`
Unicode
• The Unicode Consortium (1991)
• the Unicode standard defined as ISO 40646
• nowadays: all the world’s living languages
• highly different writing systems: Arabic, Sanscrit, Chinese, Japanese, Korean
• ambition: 250 writing systems for hundreds of languages
• Unicode assigns each character a unique code point
• example: “LATIN CAPITAL LETTER A WITH ACUTE” goes to U+00C1
• Unicode defines a character set as well as several encodings
Common Unicode encodings

- UTF-32
  - 4 bytes for any character
- UTF-16
  - 2 bytes for each character in Basic Multilingual Plane
  - other characters 4 bytes
- UTF-8
  - 1-6 bytes per character
UTF-8 and ASCII

• a killer feature of UTF-8: an ASCII-encoded text is encoded in UTF-8 at the same time!
• the actual solution:
  • the number of leading 1’s in the first byte determines the number of bytes in the following way:
    • zero ones (i.e., 0xxxxxxx): a single byte needed for the character (i.e., identical with ASCII)
    • two or more ones: the total number of bytes needed for the character
  • continuation bytes: 10xxxxxx
• a reasonable space-time trade-off
• but above all: this trick radically facilitated the spread of Unicode
• We are lucky with Czech: characters of the Czech alphabet consume at most 2 bytes
Exercise: does this or that character exist in Unicode?

• check http://shapecatcher.com/
What if you want to remove accents from text

- sometimes you need to work with both accented and non-accented characters
- no ad-hoc mapping dict from accented to non-accented chars is needed
- a standard solution:

```python
import unidecode
print(unidecode.unidecode("žšč"))
```

zsc
Working with more exotic scripts

• Example: if you need to debug a code that works with a script that you cannot read, even very simple tasks (such as visual checking whether two strings are identical) become uneasy

• a possible solution: use Unicode descriptions of characters for "reading" them

import unicodedata as ucd
test = "žšč" # try to insert e.g. some Georgian or Malayalam or so
"for cha in test:
    print(f"character: {cha}\tdescription: {ucd.name(cha,'unknown')}\")"

character: ž description: LATIN SMALL LETTER Z WITH CARON
character: š description: LATIN SMALL LETTER S WITH CARON
character: č description: LATIN SMALL LETTER C WITH CARON
Misc
Byte order mark (BOM)

- BOM = a Unicode character: U+FEFF
- a special Unicode character, possibly located at the very beginning of a text stream
- optional
- used for several different purposes:
  - specifies byte order – endianess (little or big endian)
  - specifies (with a high level of confidence) that the text stream is encoded in one of the Unicode encodings
  - distinguishes Unicode encodings
- BOM in the individual encodings:
  - UTF-8: 0xEF,0xBB,0xBF
  - UTF-16: 0xFE followed by 0xFF for big endian, the other way round for little endian
  - UTF-32 – rarely used
• Little and big endian are two ways of storing multibyte data-types (int, float, etc).
• In little endian machines, last byte of binary representation of the multibyte data-type is stored first.
• Suppose an integer stored in 4 bytes:

CREDIT: https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/
Exercise

• using any text editor, store the Czech word žlutý into a text file in UTF-8
• using the `iconv` command, convert this file into four files corresponding the these encodings:
  • cp1250
  • iso-8859-2
  • utf-16
  • utf-32
• look at the size of these 5 files (using e.g. `ls * -l`) and explain all size differences
• use `hexdump` to show the hexadecimal (“encoding-less”) content of the files
• check out what the `file` command guesses
Exercise on character identity

• Create a UTF-8 encoded file containing the Latin letter "A", the Greek letter "A", and the Cyrilic letter "A", and view the file using `hexdump -C`.

• This might be a source of confusion when working with multilingual data.
Some myths and misunderstandings about character encoding

The following statements are wrong:

- ASCII is an 8-bit encoding.
- Unicode is a character encoding.
- Unicode can only support 65,536 characters.
- UTF-16 encodes all characters with 2 bytes.
- Case mappings are 1-1.
- This is just a plain text file, no encoding.
- This file is encoded in Unicode.
- It is the filesystem who knows the encoding of this file.
- File encoding can be absolutely reliably detected by this utility.
Detection of a file’s encoding

- 100% accuracy impossible
- e.g. the following looks perfectly OK unless you have some knowledge of Czech:
  Příliš lhuoučký kůň úpěl dábelské ódy.

But
- in some situations some encodings can be rejected with certainty
  - e.g. Unicode encodings do not allow some byte sequences
  - if you have a prior knowledge (or expectation distribution) concerning the language of the text, then some encodings might be highly improbable
    - e.g. ISO-8859-1 improbable for Czech
- BOM can help too
- rule of thumb: many modern solutions default to UTF-8 if no encoding is specified
- the `file` command works reasonably well in most cases
Specification of a file’s encoding – encoding declaration

• however, “reasonably well” is not enough, we need certainty
• for most plain-text-based file formats (including source codes of programming languages) there are clear rules how encodings should be specified
  • HTML4 vs HTML5
    
    ```html
    <meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=ISO-8859-2">
    <meta charset="iso-8859-2">
    
    (btw notice the misnomer: “charset” stands for an encoding here, not for a character set (explain why))
  • XML
    
    ```xml
    <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
    
  • \LaTeX
    
    ```latex
    \usepackage[utf8]{inputenc}
    ```

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• some editors have their own encoding declaration style, such as Emacs's
  # -*- coding: <encoding-name> -*-
  or VIM's
  # vim:fileencoding=<encoding-name>
Exercise

Try to fool the `file` command

- try to construct a file whose encoding is detected incorrectly by `file`
1. In spite of some relics of chaos in the real world, the problem of character encoding has been solved almost exhaustively, esp. compared to the previous 8-bit solutions.

2. However, some new complexity has been induced (more or less inevitably), such as more a complex notion of character equivalence – Latin vs. Greek Vs. Cyrilic capital letter A.

3. Whenever possible, try to stick to Unicode (with UTF-8 being its prominent encoding).

4. Make sure you perfectly understand how Unicode is handled in your favourite programming languages and in your editors.

https://ufal.cz/courses/npfl124