

Internationalisation

With the English language being so powerful and prevalent online it can sometimes be easy to forget that a lot of the world do not speak English. Internationalisation (sometimes shortened to I18N or I - eighteen letters -N) is a term used in computing to refer to the adaption of computer software into different languages and for different geographical regions. Rather than having to redevelop a software application for every different language and region that it enters into, the process of internationalisation means that a program is designed from the beginning with the ability to adapt to these differences without having to undergo any engineering changes.

Internationalisation is often grouped together with the process of localisation, which is the adaption of software to fit with specific local languages and cultures. Indeed these two terms are really the compliment of each other, with internationalisation being necessary first to enable localisation to take place. The specifics of this process can refer to many different ways of localisation enablement. The product must first be implemented with adaptation in mind, and then space must be allowed within user interfaces for the appropriate language or cultural translation to take place. This can be anything from the support of an international character code to the design of graphic elements with space for multiple languages to be input.

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There are also processing considerations that have to be made as data space may need to be assigned to different languages uniquely, for example an English character may require a single byte character code and a Japanese character may need a multi-byte character code. Character sets or charsets are one of the most important and basic elements of applying internationalisation to an application. A charset is a character encoding scheme and it is important that language variants like those between English and Japanese are taken into consideration.

Many problems exist when it comes to designing a program with internationalisation in mind. One the biggest hurdles a developer may come across is that there are no precise standards for identifying certain international preferences among computer users. A locale is the term used to define a set of parameters as they relate to country, language and other variants. A geographical region and a language are the minimum data required for a locale to be defined, but exactly how this is implemented varies between computer platforms and applications. This makes it very hard to develop a truly global program that can be used in a variety of circumstances and platforms with ease.

Internationalisation is more complex that it may seem at first grasp, as not only language issues need to be taken into consideration. Number formats, dates and times including daylight savings and currency settings are also important factors for a sucessful translation to take place. As the digital revolution expands more and more into the developing world, these issues are becoming important from a commercial perspective. Huge new markets are opening up and it only makes sense that in order to support these markets with new products, new standards of internationalisation will have to be developed.