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Multiple Language Content Type
draft-tomkinson-slim-multilangcontent-01

Abstract

This document defines an addition to the Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions (MIME) standard to make it possible to send one message that contains multiple language versions of the same information. The translations would be identified by a language code and selected by the email client based on a user's language settings or locale.

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1. Introduction

Since the invention of email and the rapid spread of the internet, more and more people have been able to communicate in more and more countries and in more and more languages. But during this time of technological evolution, email has remained a single language communication tool, whether it is English to English, Spanish to Spanish or Japanese to Japanese.

Also during this time, many corporations have established their offices in multi-cultural cities and formed departments and teams that span continents, cultures and languages so the need to communicate efficiently with little margin for miscommunication has grown exponentially.

The objective of this document is to define an addition to the Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions (MIME) standard, to make it possible to send a single message to a group of people in such a way that all of the recipients can read the email in their preferred language. The methods of translation of the message content are beyond the scope of this document, but the structure of the email itself is defined herein.

Whilst this document depends on identification of language in message parts for non-real-time communication, there is a companion document that is concerned with a similar problem for real-time communication: [[I-D.gellens-slim-negotiating-human-language](#)]

1.1. Requirements Language

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [RFC 2119](#) [[RFC2119](#)].

2. The Content-Type Header Field

When there is a requirement to send a message in a number of different languages and the translations are to be embedded in the same message, the multipart subtype "multipart/multilingual" SHOULD be used to help the receiving email client make sense of the message structure.

The suggested multipart subtype "multipart/multilingual" has similar semantics to "multipart/alternative" (as discussed in [RFC 2046](#) [[RFC2046](#)]) in that each of the message parts is an alternative version of the same information. The primary difference between "multipart/multilingual" and "multipart/alternative" is that when using "multipart/multilingual", the message part to select for

rendering is chosen based on the values of the Content-Language field and the Translation-Type field instead of the ordering of the parts and the Content-Types.

The syntax for this multipart subtype conforms to the common syntax for subtypes of multipart given in [section 5.1.1. of RFC 2046 \[RFC2046\]](#). An example "multipart/multilingual" Content-Type header field would look like this:

```
Content-Type: multipart/multilingual; boundary=01189998819991197253
```

3. The Message Parts

A multipart/multilingual message will have a number of message parts: exactly one multilingual preface, one or more language message parts and zero or one unmatched message part. The details of these are described below.

3.1. The Multilingual Preface

In order for the message to be received and displayed in non-conforming email clients, the message SHOULD contain an explanatory message part which MUST-NOT be marked with a Content-Language field and MUST be the first of the message parts. Because non-conforming email clients are expected to treat the message as multipart/mixed (in accordance with sections [5.1.3](#) and [5.1.7](#) of [RFC 2046 \[RFC2046\]](#)) they may show all of the message parts sequentially or as attachments. Including and showing this explanatory part will help the message recipient understand the message structure.

This initial message part SHOULD explain briefly to the message recipient that the message contains multiple languages and the parts may be rendered sequentially or as attachments. This SHOULD be presented in the same languages that are provided in the subsequent language message parts.

Whilst this section of the message is useful for backward compatibility, it SHOULD only be shown when rendered by a non-conforming email client because conforming email clients SHOULD only show the single language message part identified by the user's preferred language (or locale) and the language message part's Content-Language.

For an example of a Multilingual Preface, see the examples in [Section 8](#).

3.2. The Language Message Parts

The language message parts are translations of the same message content. These message parts MAY be ordered so that the first part after the multilingual preface is in the language believed to be the most likely to be recognised by the recipient. All of the language message parts MUST have a Content-Language field and a Content-Type field, they SHOULD have a Subject field and MAY have a Translation-Type field.

The Content-Type for each individual language part MAY be any MIME type (including multipart subtypes such as multipart/alternative). However, it is recommended that the Content-Type of the language parts is kept as simple as possible for interoperability with existing email clients. The language parts are not required to have matching Content-Types or multipart structures. For example, there might be an English part of type "text/html" followed by a Spanish part of type "application/pdf" followed by a Chinese part of type "image/jpeg". Whatever the content-type, the contents SHOULD be composed for optimal viewing in the specified language.

3.3. The Unmatched Message Part

If there is content intended for the recipient to see if they have a preferred language other than one of those specified in the language parts, another part MAY be provided. This would be useful when a language independent graphic is available. When this unmatched part is present, it MUST be the last part, MUST NOT have a Content-Language field and SHOULD-NOT have a Subject field.

4. Message Part Selection

The logic for selecting the message part to render and present to the recipient is quite straightforward and is summarised in the next few paragraphs.

Firstly, if the email client does not understand multipart/multilingual then it SHOULD treat the message as if it was multipart/mixed and render message parts accordingly.

If the email client does understand multipart/multilingual then it SHOULD ignore the multilingual preface and select the best match for the user's preferred language from the language message parts available. Also, the user may prefer to see the original message content in their second language over a machine translation in their first language. The Translation-Type field value can be used for further selection based on this preference. The selection of language part may be implemented in a variety of ways and is

dependent on how the email client manages its user preferences. The ultimate goal is to render the most appropriate translation for the user. Similarly, the subject should be chosen from the selected language message part.

If there is no match for the user's preferred language (or there is no preferred language information available) the email client SHOULD select the unmatched part (if one exists) or the first language part (directly after the multilingual preface) if an unmatched part does not exist. The Subject header field value should be used whenever a suitable translation cannot be identified.

If there is no translation type preference information available, the values of the Translation-Type field may be ignored.

Additionally, interactive implementations MAY offer the user a choice from among the available languages.

5. The Content-Language Field

The Content-Language field in the individual language message parts is used to identify the language in which the message part is written. Based on the value of this field, a conforming email client can determine which message part to display (given the user's language settings or locale).

The Content-Language MUST comply with [RFC 3282](#) [[RFC3282](#)] (which defines the Content-Language field) and [BCP 47](#)/RFC 5646 [[RFC5646](#)] (which defines the structure and semantics for the language code values). While [RFC 5646](#) provides a mechanism accommodating increasingly fine-grained distinctions, in the interest of maximum interoperability, each Content-Language value SHOULD be restricted to the largest granularity of language tags; in other words, it is RECOMMENDED to specify only a Primary-subtag and NOT to include subtags (e.g., for region or dialect) unless the languages might be mutually incomprehensible without them. Examples of this field for English, German and an instruction manual in Spanish and French, could look like the following:

Content-Language: en

Content-Language: de

Content-Language: es, fr

6. The Translation-Type Field

The Translation-Type field in the individual language message parts is used to identify the type of translation. Based on the value of this field and the user's preferences, a conforming email client can determine which message part to display.

This field can have one of three possible values: 'original', 'human' or 'automated' although other values may be added in the future. A value of 'original' is given in the language message part that is in the original language. A value of 'human' is used when a language message part is translated by a human translator. A value of 'automated' is used when a language message part has been translated by an electronic agent without proofreading or subsequent correction.

Examples of this field may look like this:

Translation-Type: original

Translation-Type: human

7. The Subject Field in the Language Message parts

On receipt of the message, conforming email clients will need to render the subject in the correct language for the recipient. To enable this the Subject field SHOULD be provided in each language message part. The value for this field should be a translation of the email subject.

US-ASCII and 'encoded-word' examples of this field may look like this:

Subject: A really simple email subject

Subject: =?iso-8859-1?Q?un_asunto_de_correo_electr=F3nico_sencillo?=

See [RFC 2047](#) [[RFC2047](#)] for the specification of 'encoded-word'.

8. Examples

8.1. An Example of a Simple Multiple language email message

Below is an example of a simple multiple language email message formatted using the method detailed in this document.

From: Nik
To: Nathaniel
Subject: example of a message in Spanish and English
Content-Type: multipart/multilingual; boundary=01189998819991197253

--01189998819991197253

This is a message in two languages: English and Spanish. It says the same thing in each language. If you can read it in one language, you can ignore the other translations. The other translations may be presented as attachments or grouped together.

Este es un mensaje en dos idiomas: Ingles y Espanol. Dice lo mismo en cada idioma. Si puede leerlo en un idioma, puede ignorar las otras traducciones. Las otras traducciones pueden presentes como archivos adjuntos o agrupados.

--01189998819991197253

Content-Language: en
Translation-Type: original
Content-Type: text/plain
Subject: example of a message in Spanish and English

Hello, this message content is provided in your language.

--01189998819991197253

Content-Language: es
Translation-Type: human
Content-Type: text/plain
Subject: =?iso-8859-1?Q?ejemplo_pr=E1ctico_de_mensaje_en_espa=F1ol_e_ingl=E9s?=

Hola, el contenido de este mensaje esta disponible en su idioma.

--01189998819991197253

Content-Type: image/gif

..GIF image showing iconic or language-independent content here..

--01189998819991197253--

8.2. An Example of a Complex Multiple language email message

Below is an example of a more complex multiple language email message formatted using the method detailed in this document. Note that the language message parts have multipart contents and would therefore require further processing to determine the content to display.

From: Nik
To: Nathaniel
Subject: example of a message in Spanish and English
Content-Type: multipart/multilingual; boundary=01189998819991197253

--01189998819991197253

This is a message in two languages: English and Spanish. It says the same thing in each language. If you can read it in one language, you can ignore the other translations. The other translations may be presented as attachments or grouped together.

Este es un mensaje en dos idiomas: Ingles y Espanol. Dice lo mismo en cada idioma. Si puede leerlo en un idioma, puede ignorar las otras traducciones. Las otras traducciones pueden presentes como archivos adjuntos o agrupados.

--01189998819991197253

Content-Language: en
Translation-Type: original
Content-Type: multipart/alternative; boundary=multipartaltboundary
Subject: example of a message in Spanish and English

--multipartaltboundary

Content-Type: text/plain

Hello, this message content is provided in your language.

--multipartaltboundary

Content-Type: text/html

<html><body><p>Hello, this message content is provided in your language.<p></body></html>

--multipartaltboundary--

--01189998819991197253

Content-Language: es
Translation-Type: human
Content-Type: multipart/mixed; boundary=multipartmixboundary
Subject: =?iso-8859-1?Q?ejemplo_pr=E1ctico_de_mensaje_en_espa=F1ol_e_ingl=E9s?=

--multipartmixboundary

Content-Type: application/pdf

..PDF file in Spanish here..


```
--multipartmixboundary
Content-Type:image/jpeg

..JPEG image showing Spanish content here..

--multipartmixboundary--

--01189998819991197253
Content-Type: image/gif

..GIF image showing iconic or language-independent content here..

--01189998819991197253--
```

9. Changes from Previous Versions

9.1. Changes from [draft-tomkinson-multilangcontent-01](#) to [draft-tomkinson-slim-multilangcontent-00](#)

- o File name and version number changed to reflect the proposed WG name SLIM (Selection of Language for Internet Media).
- o Replaced the Subject-Translation field in the language message parts with Subject and provided US-ASCII and non-US-ASCII examples.
- o Introduced the language-independent unmatched message part.
- o Many wording improvements and clarifications throughout the document.

9.2. Changes from [draft-tomkinson-slim-multilangcontent-00](#) to [draft-tomkinson-slim-multilangcontent-01](#)

- o Added Translation-Type in each language message part to identify the source of the translation (original/human/automated).

10. Acknowledgements

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11. IANA Considerations

The multipart/multilingual MIME type will be registered with IANA.

12. Security Considerations

This document has no additional security considerations beyond those that apply to the standards and procedures on which it is built.

13. References

13.1. Normative References

- [RFC2046] Freed, N. and N. Borenstein, "Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions (MIME) Part Two: Media Types", [RFC 2046](#), November 1996.
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- [RFC5646] Phillips, A. and M. Davis, "Tags for Identifying Languages", [BCP 47](#), [RFC 5646](#), September 2009.

13.2. Informational References

- [I-D.gellens-slim-negotiating-human-language]
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