

# Re: ASCII convention

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- *From:* Tak To <[takto@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:takto@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)>
  - *Date:* Fri, 14 Oct 2005 11:00:55 -0400
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Jonathan Buss wrote:

Peter T. Daniels wrote:

Peter Daniels is not interested in coding. Peter Daniels is talking about the fonts on desktop computers -- the fonts that ordinary scholars, not up-to-the-minute tech gurus like yourself, use in preparing their scholarly manuscripts. If any portion of the "coding" process is visible to the end user, then the coding process is a failure. Just as no one using a typewriter needed to know anything about its innards other than changing the ribbon (though presumably they had their secretary do that).

Cars are carefully made to all work basically the same way. This "same way" does differ from country to country -- e.g., right-hand vs left-hand driving -- but in any one place, they all do basically the same thing (with some differences in controls such as wipers, etc.).

Typewriters or computer keyboards are much the same as cars. Choose either QWERTY or Dvorak (or ...) as your locale warrants, and forget it.

Much computer software is deliberately made not to work like other software. Microsoft has made most of its billions because they do not follow standards. They successfully forced other companies to chase their changes. And they have obstructed the growth of standards.

Perhaps a less cynical view is that computer programs are never "stand-alone" or "self-sufficient" contraptions like automobiles. They need a plethora of other programs and devices in order to provide the most basic function, and there are numerous protocols and conventions governing the interoperability. A newsreader program must be compatible with the operating system, with font files and font handling procedures, with other editor programs and/or cut-and-paste protocols, with the data format used by the newsserver, with that of other newsreaders, etc. In this light, it is best to

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think of a program as a component rather than an entire system. The standardization of these protocols and conventions are driven by market forces, not technical merits. This is not particular to software. For example, I would be very surprised if the head lights for my Toyota Camry would fit my Mazda van.

What is particular to software and computers, however, is that the pace of change is far greater than things like cars. Things get dated, if not outright obsolete, rather quickly. Backward compatibility is not always possible or honored. It is willful ignorance not to realize that a program X "works" only as long as other programs decide to support the protocols and conventions X uses.

Character encoding is an important aspect and there must be an agreement between the sending newsreader program and the receiving one in order for information to be conveyed. Equally important is the convention for labelling which encoding scheme is used. In Peter's case, the Netscape/MacOS combo uses an encoding scheme that was never real standard and do not even label the encoding scheme correctly. Moreover it does not understand one of the most popular encoding schemes (utf-8). However, if Peter thinks it is still good enough for him, it is his pejorative.

To answer Peter's question, I think anyone using a computer to prepare manuscript files that are to be read by other computers should at a minimum realize that what they store in the files are not "characters" but "codes", and that there is a plethora of conventions and protocols involved (explicit or otherwise) in mapping the codes to the visible glyphs on the screen or a printed page. And that "MS Word format" or "Framemaker format" are not fine enough specifications to ensure compatibility.

Tak

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Tak To

takto@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

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