

THE I18N PHENOMENON

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In computereese these days, the word *internationalization* comes up an awful lot. It usually refers to the conversion of software into a form that is accessible to users in different countries, speaking different languages. A related term, *localization*, describes the customization of software for users at a particular location, with a specific language need. Because these terms are quite long, they have curious abbreviations: i18n (referring to the fact there are 18 letters between the initial I and the final N) and l10n. We call such an abbreviation, or a10n, a *medially quantified abbreviation*, or m28n.

In general, an m28n takes the form XnY, where X and Y are letters and n is a number. Ambiguity increases quickly as n increases, for there are 26^n possible interpretations of each XnY. However, the number of realistic interpretations is far smaller. Consider plt: of the 26 possible interpretations (pat, pbt, pct, ..). only five (pat, pet, pit, pot, put) are actually possible, and this is surely higher than average for an m28n of order one. I think the most ambiguous m28n of order one is ale with 11 interpretations (ace, ade, age, ale, ape, are, ate, ave, awe, axe, aye) or 12 if you include proper names (Abe). Many m28ns of order one have only one interpretation (blx=box, llm=lam), and others have none (qlq, jlk, k1q).

If we assume that the interpretation of an m28n is one word (which makes m28n itself illegal), then ambiguity decreases as n becomes large. L18n has very little ambiguity because there are presumably few English words that are 20 letters long beginning with L and ending with N. It would be interesting to find out what the most ambiguous m28n in English is. The editor informs us that the Longman Crossword Key, compiled in 1982 by Evelyn Marshall, identifies s5r (with 217 dictionary words) as the most ambiguous; however, if plurals are allowed some other m28n would undoubtedly exceed this.