## Get Your Head Around Bidirectionality!

## Quora

## Abstract

## 42nd

Internationalization \& Unicode Conference

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We know when the software is broken for a right-to-left languages like Arabic, Persian, or Hebrew, but often the solution is either not clear, or fixing it with out-of-place patches won't worth the costs down the road. Like other areas of i18n, bidirectional layout and right-to-left language support need deliberate design in the user-interface stack, and without good architecture it won't be useful for the developers or the users.

In this tutorial, we first learn how to think in right-to-left and how it mirrors into left-to-right directionality. We then look at the common problems in bidirectional applications and how to address them with generic solutions and standard algorithms.

This tutorial is suitable for anyone not familiar with right-to-left languages or bidirectional design, or interested to learn how to develop solutions for this area.

## About me

- Software Engineer @ Quora, Inc.
- Co-Chair of Arabic Layout Task Force @ W3C i18n Activity
- Virgule Typeworks
- Facebook, Inc.
- IRNIC Domain Registry
- Sharif FarsiWeb, Inc.


## This talk

- Bidirectional Writing Systems
- Bidirectional Text
- Bidirectional Layout
- Bidirectional Web Application
- Bidirectionality Techniques


## Bidirectional Writing Systems

## History

## Boustrophedon

## from Greek

"boustrophēdón" meaning
"ox-turning"


## Line direction

 alternates. No paragraph direction.Q: Why's this useful?


## History

## Early Writing

 Systems- Most scripts chose one way or another
- Small set of writing symbols
- Letters, e.g. Greek Alpha or Arabic Alef
- Limited punctuations
- No numerals: roman and abjad numbers
- Later, Hindu-Arabic numerals
- Not (normally) read digit-by-digit
- Spelled out as a (whole) number
- Therefore: no direction in reading a numbers!


## Today

Writing systems at national level

## Today

Digital encoding

- Unicode $\approx$ unique, unified, universal encoding
- About 150 scripts encoded in Unicode:
- ~110 left-to-right (LTR) (some could also be top-to-bottom)
- ~30 right-to-left (RTL) (some are bidi...)
- the rest are top-to-bottom, or mixed directions
- Major unified scripts
- CJK: Chinese, Japanese, Korean
- Arabic: Standard/Maghrebi Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Jawi, Uyghur, ...
- Major non-unified scripts
- Latin/Greek/Cyrillic


## Bidirectional Text

## Manuscript

## text \& layout



Q

## Semantic encoding in Unicode

## Store text in

 memory in the same order as is read/processed in mind- Encode concepts, not various shapes of them
- One Arabic Letter Alef (U+0627)
- Most Arabic letters take at least 4 shapes depending on context
- But, two Latin Letter A (oops!)
- LATIN CAPITAL LETTER A (U+0041) / LATIN SMALL LETTER A (U+0061)


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- Single Period/Full Stop symbol for most scripts ("." U+002E)
- A pair of Question Marks ("?" U+003F, "e" U+061F)


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－LATIN CAPITAL LETTER A（U＋0041）／LATIN SMALL LETTER A（U＋0061）
－Some punctuations are shared，some are not
－Single Period／Full Stop symbol for most scripts（＂．＂U＋002E）
－A pair of Question Marks（＂？＂U＋003F，＂e＂U＋061F）
－Some Numerals are LTR and some RTL
－Until 2006 （encoding of N’Ko），all numerals were LTR
－European（ASCII）： 0123456789 ／Eastern Hindi－Arabic（Persian）：．Irrfosv＾9
－Recently－developed African systems use RTL numerals
－N’Ko：9レVムトさ」゙J「0

Direction in text block

## What will be the biggest internet trends between 2016-2020?

LTR paragraphs
are usually aligned
"flush left", a.k.a.
"left-aligned" or
"ragged right".

## Direction in

 text blockRTL paragraphs are usually aligned "flush right", a.k.a. "right-aligned" or "ragged left".

## What will be the biggest internet trends between 2016-2020?

$$
\begin{aligned}
& \text { بزرگترين روندهاى اينترنتى در بين سال جاى }
\end{aligned}
$$

Direction in text block

Reading direction
is usually
perceived
implicitly from the writing system...

$$
\begin{aligned}
& \text { بزرگترين روندهاى اينترنتى در بين سالهاى }
\end{aligned}
$$

Direction in text block
...allowing reading "end-aligned" text with no problems.

## What will be the biggest internet trends between 2016-2020?

بزرگترين روندهاى اينترنتى در بين سالهای چr.18- Y. F.

## Direction in text block

## What will be the biggest internet ?trends between 2016-2020

Setting the wrong direction results in poor readability, and sometimes event close to gibberish.

Direction in text block

Let's now look at
how sequences of
shapes are
perceived.

$$
\begin{aligned}
& \text { بزرگترين روندهاى اينترنتى در بين سالهاى }
\end{aligned}
$$

Direction in text block

$$
\begin{aligned}
& \text { بزركترين روندهاي اينترنتي در بين سالهاي }
\end{aligned}
$$

## Direction in text block

On the line level,
the runs are read in order, in the direction of the paragraph (base direction)


## Unicode Bidirectional Algorithm (UBA)

## Annex \#9 to the

Unicode Standard (UAX \#9)

- Converting a semantic in-memory string of chars into a reordering suitable for presentation (visual output)


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- Every Unicode Character has a Bidi Class
- Strong, such as letters
- Weak, such as numbers
- Neutral, such as whitespace, punctuation and symbols


## Unicode Bidirectional Algorithm (UBA)

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- Converting a semantic in-memory string of chars into a reordering suitable for presentation (visual output)
- Every Unicode Character has a Bidi Class
- Strong, such as letters
- Weak, such as numbers
- Neutral, such as whitespace, punctuation and symbols
- Some characters are Mirrored if in an RTL run
- Parenthesis are mirrored: "(" is an open parens in both LTR \& RTL
- Question Marks do not mirror: "?" is always closed on the right.


## Unicode Bidirectional Algorithm (UBA)

- Input: string of characters \& base direction
- Both inputs should be set correctly to achieve the correct presentation


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## High-level steps of

 the algorithm- Input: string of characters \& base direction
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High-level steps of the algorithm

- Input: string of characters \& base direction
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- Output: chars' levels (evens are LTR, odds are RTL) \& position
- First, explicit direction levels are calculated
- Based on special directional formatting characters
- Embedding (LRE, RLE), Isolate (LRI, RLI, FSI), Override (LRO, RLO)
- Higher-level protocol
- HTML (dir="rtl")
- CSS (direction: rtl;)


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- Finally, having the bidi levels, reordering can be done, when needed


## Directional embeddings

How directions are

## They translated the question

 into "بزرگترين روندهاى اينترنتى در بين Quora!
mixed when
sentences get more
complicated?

## Directional embeddings

We get opposite-

## They translated the question


direction runs
embedded in runs,
running opposite to the paragraph direction.

## Directional embeddings

In order, these will be...


## Directional embeddings

In terms of UBA embedding levels, they would be...


## Directional embeddings

In terms of UBA
embedding levels, they would be...


## Can go up to 126 levels!

Bidirectional Layout

```
e به سامانه وارد نشدهايد بحث مشاركتها ايجاد حساب كاربرى ورود
```


## Web-based layout

$\qquad$ صفحهُ اصلى بحـ

صفحةُ اصلى

صفحة اصلى
رويدادهاى كنونى
مقالةُ تصادفى
كمك مالى
آشنايى با دانشنامه • آشنايى با اصول ويرايش • كارهاى قابل انجام • سياستها و رهنمودها • فهرست الفبايى مقالهها • نسخَّ تلفن همراه
همكارى
تغييرات اخير ويكىنويس شويد!

راهنما
تماس با ويكىيديا
نسخهبردارى
ايجاد كتاب
PDF دريافت بهصورت نسخهُ قابل :حاب

در ديكر بروثهها

## Web-based layout

Top to bottom, right to left


## Web-based layout

Every block has a direction


## Direction in

 layout blocksHere, we limit the discussion to horizontal writing mode with upright line orientation and downward block flow direction.

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- Flow of movement is reversed in mirroring
- Start/previous/past is on the righthand-side (RHS)
- End/next/future is on the lefthand-side (LHS)


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- Layout direction works very similar to text direction
- Blocks are set from start to end, depending on the contextual dir.
- Table columns are also ordered from start to end
- Any sequence, such as images, is also ordered from start to end


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- Layout direction works very similar to text direction
- Blocks are set from start to end, depending on the contextual dir.
- Table columns are also ordered from start to end
- Any sequence, such as images, is also ordered from start to end
- There are a few exceptions, though!
- Modern mathematics notation (usually) stays LTR
- Some well-known interfaces, like audio/video back/play/forward set


## Mixed directions

Let＇s look at a basic example．．．

|  | Add |  |  | Share |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Add Question |  |  | Share Link |  |
| Behnam Esfahbod（エスパボドべなむ）shared Say something about this．．． |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| （f）https：／／en．wikipedia．org／wiki／Emoji |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | Emoji－Wikipedia <br> An emoji，created by the Noto project Emoji Symbol sets．．． <br> wikipedia．org • Just now |  |  |

## Mixed directions

Most elements mirror...

Some, don't.


## Mixed directions

Many levels of implicit or explicit directionality

In a sample RTL Top-level direction...

## Mixed directions

What if an

interface message is not translated?


## Static directionality



Bidirectional Web Application

## Text input

## Can't make

assumption about the script of every character of usergenerated content.

H1 H2 H3 H4 H5 H6 Blockquote UL OL Code Block

## Bold Italic Underline Monospace

2008 - CERN's Large Hadron Collider (section pictured), the world's largest and highest-energy particle accelerator, was first powered up beneath the Franco-Swiss border near Geneva.

## Text input

## Heuristic methods

often result in unexpected behavior.

## H1 H2 H3 H4 H5 H6 Blockquote UL OL Code Block

## Bold Italic Underline Monospace

CERN's Large Hadron Collider (section pictured), the - 2008 world's largest and highest-energy particle accelerator, was first .powered up beneath the Franco-Swiss border near Geneva
^. . . ب- برخورددهنده هـادرونـى بزركـ در ثنوسوئيس آغاز به كار كرد.

## Text input

Giving control of every text block to the user has the least friction.
^... . - برخورددهنده هـادرونـى بزركـ در ثنوسوئيس آغاز به كار كرد.

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Text processing

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Text processing

- The top advantage of semantic encoding of RTL/bidi text is the ease of processing
- Most Unicode characters represent a linguistic element
- Although encoding of Arabic script has extra complexities
- Finding the first letter, splitting into words, truncating a paragraph, all work very similar to LTR scripts


## Text output

- Most apps depend on the system/platform to render a bidi text
- Get good results iff play well with the text and layout algorithms


## Text output

## Plaintext

- Most apps depend on the system/platform to render a bidi text
- Get good results iff play well with the text and layout algorithms
- For plaintext, use Unicode bidi formatting chars
- Implicit: Marks (LRM, RLM, ALM)
- Useful when the problem is local and asymmetric
- e.g. positioning of a single symbol is not correct in an isolated box
- Explicit: Embedding (LRE, RLE) \& Isolate (LRI, RLI)
- Embedding is the old method, Isolate is more recent
- Useful at the boundaries of languages/scripts, also data and its surrounding sentence.


## Text output

Plaintext

## Text output

- Use formatting Marks for implicit matters
- As encoded characters, or
- As entities, \‎ and \&\#8206;


## Text output

HTML

- Use formatting Marks for implicit matters
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- For blocks and explicit directions
- Use proper attributes
- HTML (dir="rtl")
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- Leverage the default inheritance of these properties from parent nodes to children
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- Set dir attribute on the <html> or <body> tags
- Use CSS flipping tools to make a RTL version of LTR rules - As of 2018, you still cannot do that natively in CSS!


## Interface

## Non-textual elements

e به سامانه وارد نشدهايد بحث مشاركتها ايجاد حساب كاربرى ورود


## Interface

## Interface vs.

## Content

® به سامانه وارد نشدهايد بحث مشاركتها ايجاد حساب كاربرى ورود


Bidirectionality Techniques

## Directionality

 context- Direction of text runs/blocks \& layout blocks is a contextual property


## Directionality context

- Direction of text runs/blocks \& layout blocks is a contextual property
- Techniques for managing directionality context

1. Embedding
2. Inheritance
3. Cascading
4. Propagation

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- Techniques for managing directionality context

1. Embedding
2. Inheritance
3. Cascading
4. Propagation

- Abstractions to provide/absorb directionality context
- Interface translation
- Text processing
- Interface components
- HTML/platform elements and custom abstractions


## Embedding technique

Inline runs
(intra-block)

- If not clear about directional, set isolation boundaries
- Skip isolation for same-direction embeddings, if known


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- Single block (start-to-end)
- One base direction per block
- Limited to 126 levels (usually)


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- One base direction per block
- Limited to 126 levels (usually)
- Examples
- Plaintext embedding using Bidi Control Characters
- HTML embedding using inline markups


## Inheritance technique

- Inherit the direction of parent block
- Unless there's more evidence
- Static directionality
- Propagation (Technique \#4)


## Inheritance technique

## Block level

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- Top-down
- One single top-level direction
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- Top-down
- One single top-level direction
- Unlimited
- Examples
- Default behavior in HTML and most native interface stacks


## Cascading technique

- If no strong direction, fallback on the previous block's
- Continue fallback until there's a strong direction
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- Examples
- Paragraph direction setting
- GNOME Text Editor
- Draft.js


## Cascading technique

## Example from <br> Draft.js (React WYSIWYG text editor)

## Propagation technique

Block level<br>\& inline level

## Propagation technique

## Block level

\& inline level

- Direction of an element depend on a child element
- In inline, the (outer) element is perceived as an inline block.
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- Examples
- Hashtags (inline)

Welcome to the i18n Conference! \#unicode يونـىكد\#
\#unicode به كنفرانس بينالمللىسسازى خوش آمديد! \#يونـىكد

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- Link attachment preview (block)


## Propagation technique

## Example from concept for sharing external links as attachment



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- Strict abstraction is needed to make sure every data, such as phone numbers, are always presented in the right order.


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- Mixing data with interface messages is always a challenge
- Strict abstraction is needed to make sure every data, such as phone numbers, are always presented in the right order.
- Unresolved culturally questions in bidi behavior


## Summary <br> - How writing systems got directionality

- How bidi text works in written form, and is encoded \& represented
- How text and layout structures work in different directionalities
- Special application behaviors to support bidi locales \&/or content
- Additional problems that require better system \& i18n architecture


## Additional

 Reads
## Unicode Consortium

- Unicode ${ }^{\circledR}$ Standard Annex \#9-Unicode Bidirectional Algorithm (UBA)


## W3C WG Notes and Articles

- Text Layout Requirements for the Arabic Script
- Authoring HTML: Handling Right-to-left Scripts
- Additional Requirements for Bidi in HTML \& CSS
- Unicode Bidirectional Algorithm basics
- Strings and bidi


## Libraries

- Draft.js

질문?

## 質問?

## שְשׁאלוֹת?

سؤال؟

## چیرسشش؟؟

## प्रश्न?

## Questions?

Quora

