FAQs about Language Codes

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What are language codes?

Language codes are unique strings of letters that are intended to accurately identify each registered language. Often, dialects have their own distinct codes, which are also called language codes.

Why are language codes necessary?

Over 7,100 living languages are spoken on earth and language coding helps to track them.
Just a few facts to show why this is important:

- Often a language has multiple names. A language code helps to show that the names refer to the same language.
- Sometimes distinct languages in different countries have the same name. Language codes help to distinguish them.
- Because of the dynamic nature of languages and dialects, language codes are sometimes merged and sometimes split.
- Newly discovered languages need their own codes. (This happens rarely.)
- Sometimes, a dialect needs its own code if research shows that it is very different from the main language or that speakers of the different dialects don't understand each other well.

Are there different ways of coding a language or a dialect?

Yes, two systems exist that are being widely used: ISO language codes and IETF language codes.

What is an ISO language code?

ISO stands for 'International Standardization Organization'. ISO standardizes all kinds of things, and languages are one category. The ISO coding system itself has changed over the years, due to an increased understanding of the complexity and dynamics of languages. The current ISO language coding standard is ISO 639-3.

ISO language codes are also commonly called "three-letter codes", or regular language codes.

What are IETF language codes?

IETF stands for "Internet Engineering Task Force", an open international working group for developing good practices for standards of internet communication. The IETF language coding guidelines were developed to enable search engines to quickly find IETF language codes. IETF codes are based on ISO codes. Each IETF language code is unique, just like an ISO language code.

IETF language codes are also called "Private Use Codes".

If an established coding system exists, why use a different one?

For different reasons:

- The IETF coding system allows for enhancing an ISO code, thus allowing the IETF code to reflect a given language situation more precisely.
- Using IETF codes supports the COBT approach by opening up the possibility of Bible translation to language varieties that do not have an ISO code.
- Using IETF codes allows projects to be registered in PORT and initiated quickly because WA can assign the codes rather than wait for another organization to assign them.

Does every new translation project require a new language code?

No. Most languages in PORT have regular ISO codes that can and should be used if a new translation project is started. The same language code can be used for different projects in one and the same language, e.g., for NT and OT translation projects.

A new language code is only needed if a translation need has been determined or seems reasonable. This is normally done by assessing the answers provided in the Language Questionnaire (LQ). Occasionally, additional information is needed; WA staff may ask speakers of the language in question to read or listen to Scriptures that are already accessible and say how easy or hard it is to understand them.

Applying for a language code to be issued

The LQ is filled out by a church representative (ideally more than one person and more than one congregation) if a separate translation is desired. This is the case if an existing translation does not adequately serve the church's need or if a translation is completely lacking.

The LQ is then sent to designated WA staff for assessment.

The LQ has been translated into several Gateway Languages (GLs) to avoid miscommunication. More translations of the LQ are in process.