



# **All You Wanted to Know About *Collations***

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# Data Saturday Gothenburg 2025

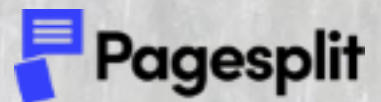
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# Agenda

- Collation basics.
- Unicode and code pages.
- The anatomy of a collation name.
- UTF-8 collations.
- Collation conflicts.
- Two performance cases.

# What Is a Collation?

A collation is a set of rules for how to handle string data depending on human language. This includes:

- Comparison. Is 'I' = 'i'? 'V' = 'W'? 'Ö' > 'Z'? '+' > '-'?
- Grouping and sorting.
- Result of upper/lower.
- LIKE ranges, for instance `col LIKE '[A-Z]%'`.
- Which code points in Unicode that are defined.
- The code page for varchar.



# Four Levels to Set Collations

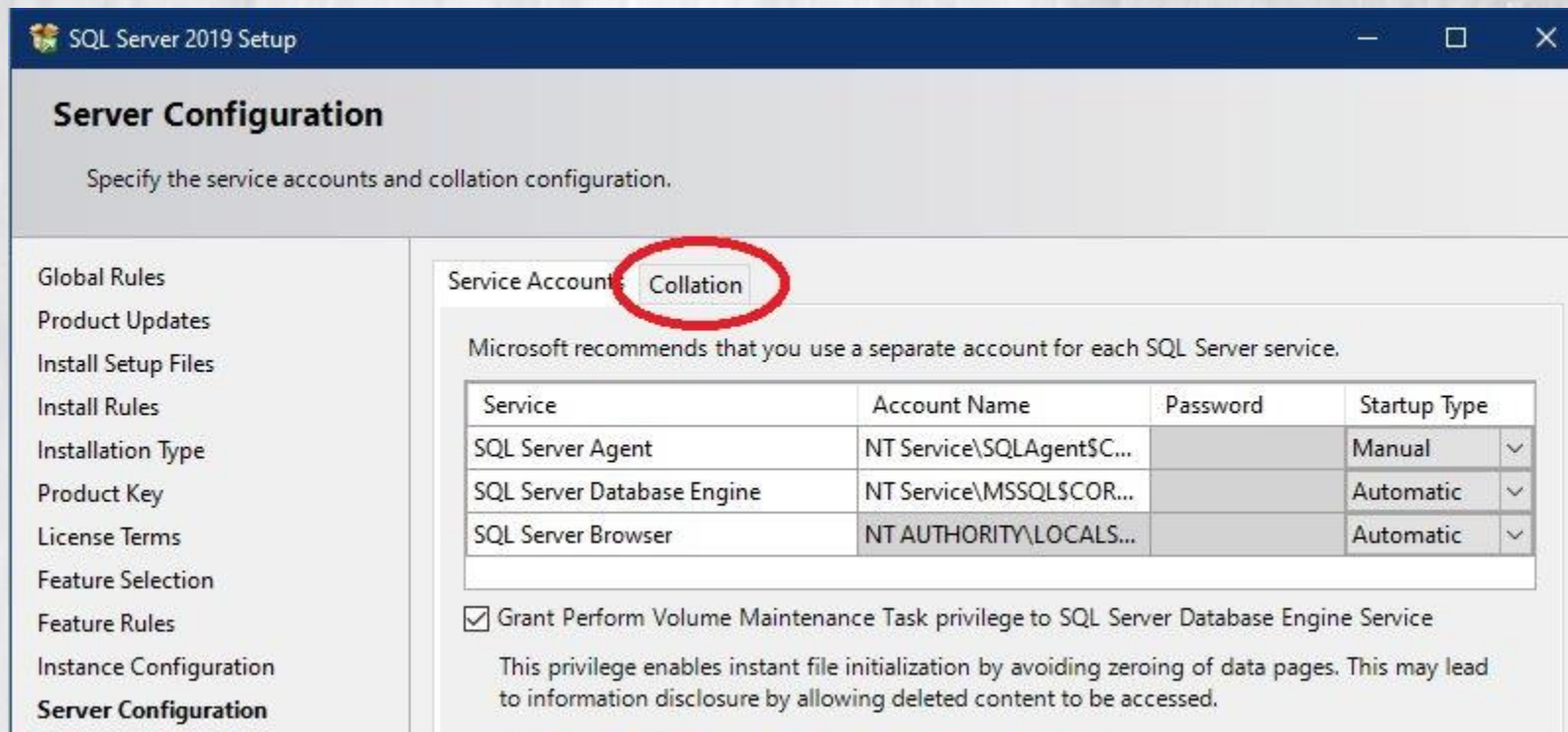
- **Server collation** – set when you install SQL Server.
  - Collation for the system databases.
  - Default collation for string columns in temp tables.
  - The default for:
- **Database collation** – may override server collation.
  - Defines the collation for string variables and literals.
  - Sets the default for collation in user tables and table variables.
- **Column collation** – may override database setting.
- **Expression level** – to cast collation when needed.

# Collations and Metadata

- Due to legacy, collations also control metadata.
- The server collation controls:
  - Names of server-level objects (databases, logins etc).
  - Names of temp tables and column names in temp tables and table variables.
  - *Names* of variables. (Values follow the database collation.)
- The database collation controls:
  - Names of database-level objects (tables, columns, users, etc).
  - Service-Broker objects have a binary collation.
- Azure SQL DB defaults to a fixed metadata collation.

# Collations and Setup

- In Setup wizard, collation is tucked away on a secondary tab:





# Collations and Setup

- Always check what is on that secondary tab – it may not be what you expect.
- The default in the Setup Wizard is taken from the Windows system locale – which may differ from your personal regional settings.
- For some system locales, the default collation is not appropriate.
- Changing a collation after the fact is painful!
  - [This article](#) on my web site can help you.




# The Unicode Character Set

- Windows is based on *Unicode*, a character set which supports all human languages.
- 1.1 million possible code points (21 bits). 155 000 are defined.
- New versions of Unicode define more code points.
  - A collation is based on a certain Unicode version.
- All living languages can be expressed with the “base plane” – code points 0 to 65535 (16 bits).
- Code points 32-126 = ASCII. 160-255 = ISO Latin-1.



# Unicode Encodings

- Sample code points: A = U+0041, ö = U+00F6, α = U+03B1, 中 = U+4E2D,  = U+1F0A1.
- Unicode can be encoded in several ways. Most commonly used are:
  - UTF-8, one to four bytes per code point.
  - UTF-16, two bytes per code point for the base plane, four bytes per code point for the rest.
- Windows is based on UTF-16.
- In SQL Server, nvarchar is UTF-16.



# Legacy Code Pages

- Windows supports legacy charsets, called *code pages*.
- They all(?) have ASCII in the range 32-126 and use the range 128-255 to support one or more languages.
- Some examples:
  - CP850 (West Eur, proprietary from MS-DOS days).
  - CP932 (Japanese).
  - CP1250 (East Eur, ISO-8859-2, a.k.a. Latin-2).
  - CP1252 (West Eur, ISO-8859-1, a.k.a. Latin-1).
  - CP65001 (UTF8).
- These code pages are the foundation for varchar.
  - Varchar is not always 8-bit!



# All the Collations

- In SQL 2025, there are 5540 official collations.
  - Adding deprecated and compatibility collations, the number is 90493!
- They fall into two groups: Windows and SQL collations.
- 5463 Windows collations.
  - Based on Windows system locales.
  - All operations are carried out in UTF-16 also for varchar.
- 77 SQL Collations, legacy from SQL 7 and earlier.
  - For nvarchar they are like a Windows collation.
  - For varchar, based on a specific code page with its own library.
  - While legacy, the most commonly used collation is SQL\_Latin1\_General\_CP1\_CI\_AS.

# The Anatomy of a Collation Name

- Thai\_100\_CI\_AI\_KS\_WS\_SC\_UTF8 – Means what?
- Thai – Collation family.
- 100 – Version number.
- CI/AI – Case and accent (in)sensitivity.
- KS/WS/VSS – Japanese matters.
- BIN and BIN2 – Binary.
- SC – Surrogate compatible.
- UTF8 support.



# Collation Families

- **Example of collation families:**
  - Thai, Polish, Traditional\_Spanish, Modern\_Spanish, Finnish\_Swedish, Latin1\_General, Cyrillic\_General.

A collation family determines:

- **Basic sorting and comparison rules.**
  - Further refined by CI/CS, AI/AS etc.
- **Rules for lower/upper.**
- **The code page for varchar. (Not UTF8 collations.)**

[02\\_collationfamilies.sql](#)

# The Version Number

- Can be none (=80), 90, 100, 140 or 160.
  - 80: The original collations in SQL 2000.
  - 90: Support for a few more languages in SQL 2005.
  - 100: New versions of the original and support for more languages in SQL 2008.
  - 140: Only Japanese collations.
  - 160: Only Chinese collations.
- The version number is tied to a version of Unicode, and thus determines which code points that are defined and understood.



# Case and Accent Sensitivity

- CI – Case insensitive. 'insert' = 'INSERT'.
- CS – Case sensitive. 'insert' <> 'INSERT'.
- AI – Accent insensitive. 'resume' = 'résumé'.
- AS – Accent sensitive. 'resume' <> 'résumé'.
- CI\_AS is the most commonly used combination, but CI\_AI, CS\_AS and CS\_AI are all possible.

# Japanese Matters – KS/WS/VSS

- **KS:** Japanese has two syllable scripts, Hiragana and Katakana.
  - Is なかめぐろ = ナカメグロ? (“Naka-Meguro”)
  - Yes, if no KS. No if KS (Kana-sensitive).
- **WS:** To match East-Asian and Latin characters in size, there are fullwidth and halfwidth forms.
  - Is Paris = P a r i s?
  - Is ナカメグロ = ナカメグロ?
  - Yes, if no WS. No if WS (Width-sensitive.)
- **VSS:** Variation-selector sensitive. I pass. :-)
  - Only in Japanese collations with version number = 140.



# Binary Collations

- Binary collations sort and compare by code point.
- They are case-, accent-, kana-, and everything else-sensitive.
- Not always user-friendly – but they are fast.
- There are two of them `_BIN` and `_BIN2`.
- `BIN2` are “normal”, sort all by code point.
- `BIN` are legacy. Swap the first byte only, and sort remaining by raw binary.

[06\\_binarycollations.sql](#)

# SC – Supplementary Characters or Surrogate Compatible

- In UTF-16, characters beyond the base plane are encoded as so-called surrogate pairs.
  - High word is in the range U+D800 to U+DBFF.
  - Low word is in the range U+DC00 to U+DFFF.
- The original version-80, 90 and 100 collations only support the Unicode base plane, 0-65535.
- The `_SC` collations support UTF-16 in full.
- All version-90 and later have an `_SC` version.
  - Binary collations are not surrogate aware.



# UTF-8 Collations

- Introduced in SQL 2019. Suffix is `_UTF8`.
- All SC collations have a UTF-8 version.
  - Thus, there are no version-80 collations for UTF8.
- In a UTF8 collation the code page for varchar is always 65001 = UTF-8.
- UTF-8 collations do not support the text and ntext data types. (True for all SC collations.)
- There is one binary UTF-8 collation, `Latin1_General_100_BIN2_UTF8`.

# Saving Space with UTF-8?

- The range 0-127 takes up one byte.
  - ASCII. Up to 50 % space saving for English.
- The range 128-2047 is encoded with two bytes.
  - Latin, Cyrillic, Greek, Arabic, and a few more scripts.
  - Still 5-10 % space saving for non-Latin scripts.
- The range 2048-65535 need three bytes.
  - Languages of India, Chinese, Japanese, Thai etc.
  - Up to 50 % more space.
- Beyond the base plane, four bytes.
  - No difference to UTF-16.



# UTF-8 and String Length

- `varchar(30)` means 30 *bytes*.
- To permit for 30 characters, you may need `varchar(60)` – and still take your chances that you will not need to store Chinese or emojis.
- Then again, a 10-byte value in a `varchar(60)` does not take up more space than in a `varchar(30)`.

# UTF-8 or UTF-16 (nvarchar)?

- Personally, for a new application I would still go with nvarchar for international support.
  - More predictable.
  - Better performance.
  - Space can be saved with row compression as well.
  - But it certainly is a matter of preference.
- For an existing app with varchar that faces international needs, moving to a UTF-8 collation can be less painful than switching to nvarchar.
  - But it may still be a lot of work. [My article](#) has a few tips.



# Collation Conflicts

- When columns with different collations meet you get a conflict.

[11\\_collation\\_conflict.sql](#)

- Resolve with COLLATE:

```
JOIN a ON a.col COLLATE Latin1_General_CI_AS = b.col
```

- This casts the collation for *both* columns.
- Beware that casting the collation kills any index.
- Best practice: Use `COLLATE DATABASE_DEFAULT` in temp tables.
- Columns always win over variables/constants.

# Collations and Performance

- Does the collation affect performance?
- Yes – but effect is moderate, and evened out over the entire workload, it may not be noticeable.
- You select the collation from business needs, not from performance.
- But there are two situations where the collation has an enormous impact.



# The Data-Type Mismatch Accident

- Consider this: `WHERE indexedvarchar = @nvarchar`.
  - A programming mistake, but it can happen easily.
- The varchar column is converted to nvarchar.
- Windows collation: varchar is an ordered subset of nvarchar.
- => Index Seek with some extra operators. Expect an overhead of 2-5x – which for a quick lookup is not much.

# SQL Collations Are Different

[12 SQL-collation.sql](#)

- SQL collation: varchar sorts and compares differently from nvarchar.
- Thus, in case of a data-type mismatch, index is dead and there must be a scan.
- Performance disaster. Can be a million times slower. Or more.



# WHERE stringcol LIKE '%abc%'

- Not only must there be a scan of index/table, but SQL Server must also scan each string.
- With `nvarchar` or a Windows collation, the complex Unicode rules are applied to every character – that adds up.
- For *varchar*, SQL collations are 7-10 times faster than Windows collations.
  - Because there are only 255 characters to consider.

# Binary Collations to the Rescue?

- Binary Windows collations are even faster – but are case-, accent- etc sensitive.
- However, try this:

```
upper(col) COLLATE Latin1_General_BIN2 LIKE upper(@str)
```

- Works for both varchar and nvarchar.
- Not entirely foolproof – but may be good enough.



# The Final Slide

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Slides and scripts on  
<http://www.sommarskog.se/present>

The loooooong article:  
<https://www.sommarskog.se/collations.html>

Clean-up script:

[14 cleanup.sql](#)