Concise Binary Object Representation (CBOR) Sequences
draft-ietf-cbor-sequence-01

Abstract

This document describes the Concise Binary Object Representation
(CBOR) Sequence format and associated media type "application/cbor-
seq". A CBOR Sequence consists of any number of encoded CBOR data
items, simply concatenated in sequence.

Structured syntax suffixes for media types allow other media types to
build on them and make it explicit that they are built on an existing
media type as their foundation. This specification defines and
registers "+cbor-seq" as a structured syntax suffix for CBOR
Sequences.

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1. Introduction

The Concise Binary Object Representation (CBOR) [RFC7049] can be used for serialization of data in the JSON [RFC8259] data model or in its own, somewhat expanded data model. When serializing a sequence of such values, it is sometimes convenient to have a format where these sequences can simply be concatenated to obtain a serialization of the concatenated sequence of values, or to encode a sequence of values that might grow at the end by just appending further CBOR data items.

This document describes the concept and format of "CBOR Sequences", which are composed of zero or more encoded CBOR data items. CBOR Sequences can be consumed (and produced) incrementally without requiring a streaming CBOR parser that is able to deliver substructures of a data item incrementally (or a streaming encoder able to encode from substructures incrementally).

This document defines and registers the "application/cbor-seq" media type in the media type registry, along with a CoAP Content-Format identifier. Media type structured syntax suffixes [RFC6838] were introduced as a way for a media type to signal that it is based on
another media type as its foundation. CBOR [RFC7049] defines the
"+cbor" structured syntax suffix. This document defines and
registers the "+cbor-seq" structured syntax suffix in the "Structured
Syntax Suffix Registry".

1.1. Conventions Used in This Document

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT",
"SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and
"OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in
BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all
capitals, as shown here.

In this specification, the term "byte" is used in its now-customary
sense as a synonym for "octet".

2. CBOR Sequence Format

Formally, a CBOR Sequence is a sequence of bytes that is recursively
defined as either

- an empty (zero-length) sequence of bytes
- the sequence of bytes making up an encoded CBOR data item
  [RFC7049], followed by a CBOR Sequence.

In short, concatenating zero or more encoded CBOR data items
generates a CBOR Sequence. (Consequently, concatenating zero or more
CBOR Sequences also results in a CBOR Sequence.)

There is no end of sequence indicator. (If one is desired, CBOR-
encoding an array of the CBOR data model values being encoded --
employing either a definite or an indefinite length encoding -- as a
single CBOR data item may actually be the more appropriate
representation.)

CBOR Sequences, unlike JSON Text Sequences [RFC7464], do not use a
marker between items. This is possible because CBOR encoded data
items are self-delimiting and the end can always be calculated.
(Note that, while the early object/array-only form of JSON was self-
delimiting as well, this stopped being the case when simple values
such as single numbers were made valid JSON documents.)

Decoding a CBOR Sequence works as follows:

- If the CBOR Sequence is an empty sequence of bytes, the result is
  an empty sequence of CBOR data model values.
o Otherwise, decode a single CBOR data item from the bytes of the
CBOR sequence, and insert the resulting CBOR data model value at
the start of the result of decoding the rest of the bytes as a
CBOR sequence. (A streaming decoder would therefore simply
deliver zero or more CBOR data model values, each of which as soon
as the bytes making it up are available.)

This means that if any data item in the sequence is not well-formed,
it is not possible to reliably decode the rest of the sequence. (An
implementation may be able to recover from some errors in a sequence
of bytes that is almost, but not entirely a well-formed encoded CBOR
data item. Handling malformed data is outside the scope of this
specification.)

This also means that the CBOR Sequence format can reliably detect
truncation of the bytes making up the last CBOR data item in the
sequence, but not entirely missing CBOR data items at the end. A
CBOR Sequence decoder that is used for consuming streaming CBOR
Sequence data may simply pause for more data (e.g., by suspending and
later resuming decoding) in case a truncated final item is being
received.

3. The "+cbor-seq" Structured Syntax Suffix

The use case for the "+cbor-seq" structured syntax suffix is the same
as for "+cbor": It SHOULD be used by a media type when parsing the
bytes of the media type object as a CBOR Sequence leads to a
meaningful result that is at least sometimes not just a single CBOR
data item. (Without the qualification at the end, this sentence is
trivially true for any +cbor media type, which of course should
continue to use the "+cbor" structured syntax suffix.)

Applications encountering a "+cbor-seq" media type can then either
simply use generic processing if all they need is a generic view of
the CBOR Sequence, or they can use generic CBOR Sequence tools for
initial parsing and then implement their own specific processing on
top of that generic parsing tool.

4. Practical Considerations

4.1. Specifying CBOR Sequences in CDDL

In CDDL [RFC8610], CBOR sequences are already supported as contents
of byte strings using the ".cborseq" control operator (Section 3.8.4
of [RFC8610]), by employing an array as the controller type:
my-embedded-cbor-seq = bytes .cborseq my-array
my-array = [* my-element]
my-element = my-foo / my-bar

CDDL currently does not provide for unadorned CBOR sequences as a top-level subject of a specification. For now, the suggestion is to use an array, as for the ".cborseq" control operator, for the top-level rule and add English text that explains that the specification is really about a CBOR sequence with the elements of the array:

; This defines an array, the elements of which are to be used
; in a CBOR sequence:
my-sequence = [* my-element]
my-element = my-foo / my-bar

(Future versions of CDDL may provide a notation for top-level CBOR sequences, e.g. by using a group as the top-level rule in a CDDL specification.)

4.2. Diagnostic Notation

CBOR diagnostic notation (see Section 6 of [RFC7049]) or extended diagnostic notation (Appendix G of [RFC8610]) also does not provide for unadorned CBOR Sequences at this time (the latter does provide for CBOR Sequences embedded in a byte string in Appendix G.3 of [RFC8610]).

In a similar spirit to the recommendation for CDDL above, this specification recommends enclosing the CBOR data items in an array. In a more informal setting, where the boundaries within which the notation is used are obvious, it is also possible to leave off the outer brackets for this array, as shown in these two examples:

[1, 2, 3]
1, 2, 3

Note that it is somewhat difficult to discuss zero-length CBOR Sequences in the latter form.

4.3. Optimizing CBOR Sequences for Skipping Elements

In certain applications, being able to efficiently skip an element without the need for decoding its substructure, or efficiently fanning out elements to multi-threaded decoding processes, is of the utmost importance. For these applications, byte strings (which carry length information in bytes) containing embedded CBOR can be used as the elements of a CBOR sequence:
; This defines an array of CBOR byte strings, the elements of which
; are to be used in a CBOR sequence:
my-sequence = [* my-element]
my-element = bytes .cbor my-element-structure
my-element-structure = my-foo / my-bar

Within limits, this may also enable recovering from elements that
internally are not well-formed -- the limitation is that the sequence
of byte strings does need to be well-formed as such.

5. Security Considerations

The security considerations of CBOR [RFC7049] apply. This format
provides no cryptographic integrity protection of any kind, but can
be combined with security specifications such as COSE [RFC8152] to do
so.

As usual, decoders must operate on input that is assumed to be
untrusted. This means that decoders must fail gracefully in the face
of malicious inputs.

6. IANA Considerations

6.1. Media Type

Media types are registered in the media types registry
[IANA.media-types]. IANA is requested to register the MIME media
type for CBOR Sequence, application/cbor-seq, as follows:

Type name: application

Subtype name: cbor-seq

Required parameters: N/A

Optional parameters: N/A

Encoding considerations: binary

Security considerations: See RFCthis, Section 5.

Interoperability considerations: Described herein.

Published specification: RFCthis.

Applications that use this media type: Data serialization and
deserialization.
6.2. CoAP Content-Format Registration

IANA is requested to assign a CoAP Content-Format ID for the media type "application/cbor-seq", in the CoAP Content-Formats subregistry of the core-parameter registry [IANA.core-parameters], from the "Expert Review" (0-255) range. The assigned ID is shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media type</th>
<th>Encoding</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>application/cbor-seq</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>TBD63</td>
<td>RFCthis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: CoAP Content-Format ID

RFC editor: Please replace TBD63 by the number actually assigned and delete this paragraph.

6.3. Structured Syntax Suffix

Structured Syntax Suffixes are registered within the "Structured Syntax Suffix Registry" maintained at [IANA.media-type-structured-suffix]. IANA is requested to register the "+cbor-seq" structured syntax suffix in accordance with [RFC6838], as follows:

Name: CBOR Sequence
+suffix: +cbor-seq

References: RFCthis

Encoding considerations: binary

Fragment identifier considerations: The syntax and semantics of fragment identifiers specified for +cbor-seq SHOULD be as specified for "application/cbor-seq". (At publication of this document, there is no fragment identification syntax defined for "application/cbor-seq".)

The syntax and semantics for fragment identifiers for a specific "xxx/yyy+cbor-seq" SHOULD be processed as follows:

For cases defined in +cbor-seq, where the fragment identifier resolves per the +cbor-seq rules, then process as specified in +cbor-seq.

For cases defined in +cbor-seq, where the fragment identifier does not resolve per the +cbor-seq rules, then process as specified in "xxx/yyy+cbor-seq".

For cases not defined in +cbor-seq, then process as specified in "xxx/yyy+cbor-seq".

Interoperability considerations: n/a

Security considerations: See RFCthis, Section 5

Contact: CBOR WG mailing list (cbor@ietf.org), or any IESG-designated successor.

Author/Change controller: IETF
7. References

7.1. Normative References

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Acknowledgements

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