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News from the “\LaTeX\ Tagged PDF” project

The multi-year project to automatically tag \LaTeX\ documents in order to make them accessible [3] is progressing steadily (at this point in time mainly as experimental latex-lab code).

Just recently we added support for automatic tagging of tabular structures including environments from \tabularx\ and \longtable. The code is still in its early stages and lacks configuration possibilities—these will be added in the future.

Approaching an important milestone

Nevertheless, with this new addition we are more or less able to automatically tag any document that confines itself to the commands and environments described in Leslie Lamport’s \LaTeX\ Manual [1] by simply adding a single configuration line at the top.

In addition, a number of extension packages that go beyond Lamport are already supported, most importantly perhaps \amsmath (providing extended math capabilities) and \hyperref (enhancing \LaTeX\ with interactive hyperlinking features). Also already supported are some of the major bibliography support packages such as \natbib and \biblatex.

For now activation is done through the line
\begin{verbatim}
\DocumentMetadata
{testphase={phase-III,math,table}}
\end{verbatim}

The math and the tabular support are not yet incorporated into phase-III but need their own activation, so that we can better experiment with additions and code adjustments.

The latex-lab bundle contains various (still untagged) documentation files about the new code that can be accessed with \texttt{texdoc -l latex-lab}.

A GitHub repository dedicated to the project

We have also started a new GitHub repository mainly intended for reporting issues, and offering a platform for discussions. For example, there is one discussion on ways to extend the \LaTeX\ tabular syntax to allow describing the logical structure of tables (e.g., which cells are header cells, etc.).

Having all issues and discussions related to the project in a single place instead of being spread across multiple repositories such as \latex2e, \latex3, \tagpdf, \hyperref, \pdffonts, etc., helps people to find information easily and report any issue related to the project without needing to know in which code repository the problematic code resides.

You find this repository at \url{https://github.com/latex3/tagging-project} and the mentioned discussion on \tabular syntax at \url{https://github.com/latex3/tagging-project/discussions/1}.

Your feedback is important and reporting what doesn’t yet work is beneficial to all users, so we hope to see you there and thank you for any contribution, whether it is an issue or a post on a discussion thread.

Hooks, sockets and plugs

In previous releases of \LaTeX\ we introduced the general concept of hooks (both specific and generic ones). These are places in the code into which different packages (or the user in the document preamble) can safely add their own code to extend the functionality of existing commands and environments without the need to overwrite or patch them in incompatible ways. An important feature of such hooks is that the code chunks added by different packages can be ordered by rules, if necessary, thereby avoiding problems arising from
differences in package loading order. See \texttt{\LaTeX} News

However, sometimes you need a kind of “hook” into which only a single chunk of code is placed at any time.\footnote{While this is in theory possible to model with the existing hook mechanism, it is inefficient and cumbersome.} For example, there is code that implements footnote placement in relation to bottom floats (above or below them). But at any time in the document only one such placement code can be in force. Or consider the extra code needed for making \texttt{\LaTeX} documents accessible (e.g., adding tags to the PDF output). Such code is either there (perhaps in alternative versions) or not at all, but it cannot have code from other packages added at the same point interfering with the algorithm.

For these use cases we now introduce the concept of sockets and plugs. A socket is a place in the code into which one can put a plug (a chunk of code with a name) after which the socket is in use; to put in a different plug, the former one has to be taken out first.\footnote{Think of electric outlets and plugging something into them.} A socket may or may not have inputs that can then be used by the plugs. While this is technically not much different to putting a command in the code and at some point alter its definition, the advantage is that this offers a consistent interface, allows for status information, supports tracing, etc.

You declare a new socket and possibly some plugs for it with

\begin{verbatim}
\NewSocket{⟨socket name⟩}{⟨# of inputs⟩}
\NewSocketPlug{⟨socket name⟩}{⟨plug name⟩}{⟨code⟩}
\end{verbatim}

For example, after the declaration \texttt{\NewSocket{foo}{0}} you can immediately use this socket in your code with \texttt{\UseSocket{foo}}. The \texttt{\NewSocket} declaration automatically defines a simple plug with the name \texttt{noop} for the socket and assigns it to the socket (plugs it in), thus your \texttt{\UseSocket} sits idle doing nothing\footnote{Sockets with one input also define an \texttt{identity} plug and initially assign that to the socket—this means that their input is simply returned without processing.} until you assign it a different plug, which is done with \texttt{\AssignSocketPlug}. This takes the current plug out and puts the new one in. All the declarations and commands are also available in the \texttt{\LaTeX}3 programming layer as \texttt{\socketnewnn, \socketnewplugnn}, etc.

With this concept we can, for example, add tagging support for the “\texttt{\LaTeX} Tagged PDF” project to various packages without altering their behavior if the tagging code is inactive. Activating one or the other form of tagging then just means to assign named plugs to the different sockets.

This is just a brief introduction to the mechanism; for more detailed documentation see \texttt{texdoc ltsockets-doc}.

\section*{Document properties and cross-referencing}

Traditional \texttt{\LaTeX} uses \texttt{\label{⟨key⟩}} to record the values of two “local” properties of the document: the textual representations of the current page number and the current \texttt{\ref} value set by \texttt{\refstepcounter} declarations [1, p. 209]. (These declarations are issued, for example, by sectioning commands, by numbered environments like \texttt{equation}, and by \texttt{\item} in an \texttt{enumerate} or similar environment.)

These two recorded values can then be accessed and typeset (from anywhere in the next run of the document) by use of the (non-expandable) commands \texttt{\ref} and \texttt{\pageref} using the \texttt{⟨key⟩} that was specified as the argument to \texttt{\label} when recording these values. This supported basic cross-referencing (within a document), using these recorded values to provide both page-related and counter-related information (such as the page xvii or the subsection number 4.5.2).\footnote{In the Spring 2023 release of \texttt{\LaTeX}, the \texttt{\label} command was extended to record, in addition, both a title (such as the text used in a section head) and the \texttt{logical name} used for an associated link target provided these have been set by packages such as \texttt{nameref} or \texttt{hyperref}.}

Over the years \texttt{\LaTeX} packages have appeared that extend this basic “label-ref system” in various ways. For example, the \texttt{refcount} package made a small but significant change to the functions used to access recorded values, by making them expandable. And the \texttt{smart-ref} package supports the storage of a larger collection of counter values so that, for example, a cross-reference can refer to the relevant chapter together with an equation tag. The \texttt{cleveref} package stores (by means of a second, internal “logical label”) extra information such as the name of the counter. The \texttt{hyperref} package adds the \texttt{\autoref} command, which tries to retrieve the name of a counter from the \texttt{logical name} used for a link target. The \texttt{tikzmarks} library records information about \texttt{labeled positions} on the page when using \texttt{tikz}. Finally, the \texttt{zref} package implements many related ideas, including a general idea of properties and lists of properties, with methods to record, and subsequently access, the value of any declared property.

Starting with this release, the \texttt{\LaTeX} kernel provides handling of general document properties as a core functionality with standard interfaces. This is based on concepts introduced by the \texttt{zref} package but with some differences in detail, particularly in the implementation. It supports the declaration of new properties, and the recording of the values of any list of properties. These values are retrieved expandably.

To set up a new property that is the current chapter number, for example, here is the declaration to use.

\begin{verbatim}
\NewProperty{chapter}{now}{⟨?⟩}{\thechapter}
\end{verbatim}
The second argument means that the property value will be recorded immediately (“now”), and not “during the next \shipout”. The third argument sets a default to be used when, for example, an unknown label is supplied. The final argument contains the code that will, as part of the recording process, be expanded to obtain the value to record for this property.

Then, to record the value of this new property, together with others, use this command.

$$\text{\textbackslash RecordProperties\{mylabel\}}$$

{chapter, page, label}

This records the current values for the properties chapter, page, and label, using mylabel as the label, or key, for the record.

To reference (i.e., retrieve) this recorded value for use in a cross-reference to this chapter, use the \texttt{\textbackslash RefProperty} command with two arguments: the label, or key, and the property.

$$\text{\textbackslash RefProperty\{mylabel\}\{chapter\}}$$

The \LaTeX{} kernel itself contains declarations for some generally useful properties, including these:

- \texttt{\textbackslash label} the textual representation of the current \textbackslash ref value, see above;
- \texttt{\textbackslash page} the textual representation of the page number for the page currently under construction;
- \texttt{\textbackslash title} the title, if set by, e.g., \texttt{\textbackslash nameref};
- \texttt{\textbackslash target} the logical name of the associated link target, if set by, e.g., \texttt{\textbackslash hyperref};
- \texttt{\textbackslash pagetarget} the logical name of the target added by \texttt{\textbackslash hyperref} at the origin of each shipped out page;
- \texttt{\textbackslash pagenum} the value of the \LaTeX{} counter page in Arabic numerals;
- \texttt{\textbackslash abspage} the absolute page number of the page under construction, i.e., one more than the number of pages shipped out so far (thus it starts at 1 and is increased by 1 whenever a page is shipped out);
- \texttt{\textbackslash counter} the name of the counter that produced the current \textbackslash ref value, i.e., the counter that was stepped in the most recent \texttt{\textbackslash refstepcounter} within the current scope;
- \texttt{\textbackslash xpos, ypos} the position on the shipped out page as set by the most recent \texttt{\textbackslash pdfsavepos}; recording these properties should be done as soon as possible after saving the position.

Both \LaTeX{}2ε commands (using camel-case names) and \LaTeX{}3 programming layer commands are provided. For a more complete documentation, see \texttt{\textasciitilde{\textbackslash lutproperties-doc}}.

### New or improved commands

#### Testing for the \texttt{\textbackslash expl3} programming layer version:

\texttt{\textbackslash ifExplAtLeastTF}

The integration of expl3 (the \LaTeX{}3 programming layer) into the kernel means that programmers can use all of the features available without needing to load it explicitly. However, as expl3 is upgraded separately from \LaTeX{}2ε and is not a separate package, its version is different from that of \LaTeX{}2ε and cannot be tested using \texttt{\textbackslash ifPackageAtLeastTF}. To date, low-level methods have therefore been needed to check for the availability of features in expl3. We have now added \texttt{\textbackslash ifExplAtLeastTF} as a test working in the same way as \texttt{\textbackslash ifPackageAtLeastTF} but focused on the pre-loaded programming layer. Programmers can check the date of expl3 they are using in the .log, as it appears both at the start and end in the format L3 programming layer <YYYY-MM-DD> just after the line which identifies the format (LaTeX2ε, etc.).

(github issue 1004)

#### Code improvements

**Support for tabs in \verb* and \verbatim**

\LaTeX{} converts a single tab to a single space, which is then treated like a “real” space in typesetting. The same has been true to date inside \verb, but was done in a way that meant that they remained as normal spaces even in \verb*, etc. We have now adjusted the code so that tabs are retained within the argument to \verb and \verb*, and the \verbatim and \verbatim* environments, independently from spaces, and are set up to print in the same way spaces do. This means that they now generate visible spaces inside \verb* and \verbatim*, and their behavior can be adjusted if required to be different from that of spaces.

(github issue 1085)

**Improved argument checking for box commands**

Previously if an alignment option had an unexpected value, such as \texttt{\textbackslash makebox[4cm] [x]{text}}, no warning was given but the box content was silently discarded. This will now produce a warning and act like the default \texttt{c} alignment. \texttt{\textbackslash framebox} and \texttt{\textbackslash parbox} have a similar change.

(github issue 1072)

**Aligning status of tilde with other active characters**

Some time ago we revised the definition of active characters in pdf\LaTeX{} to allow the full range of UTF-8 codepoints to be used in for example labels, file names, etc. However, ~ was not changed at that point as it is active independent of the engine in use. This has now been corrected: the definition of ~ is an engine-protected one which gives the string version of the character if used inside a csname.
In the programming layer

In the programming layer (expl3), we have revised the behavior of the titlecasing function to enable this to either titlecase only the first word of the input, or to titlecase every word. This should be transparent at the document level but will be useful for programmers.

We have also added the ability to define variables and functions inside \fpeval (at the expl3 level this is \fp_eval:n). This allows programmers to create non-standard functions that can then be used inside \fpeval. For example, this could be used to create a new function dinner:

\ExplSyntaxOn
\fp_new_variable:n{duck}
\fp_new_function:n{dinner}
\fp_set_function:nnn{dinner}{duck}
  {duck - 0.25 * duck}
\fp_set_variable:nn{duck}{1}
$\fp_eval:n{duck}$
$\fp_eval:n{dinner(duck)}$
$\fp_eval:n{dinner(duck)}$
$\fp_eval:n{dinner(duck)}$
$\fp_eval:n{dinner(duck)}$
$\fp_eval:n{dinner(duck)}$
\ExplSyntaxOff

The computation above would then generate

\[ 1 > 0.75 > 0.5625 > 0.421875 > 0.31640625 \]

Users will be able to access added functions without needing to use the expl3 layer. It is possible that a future release of \LaTeX{} will add the ability to create and set floating point variables at the document level: this will be examined based on feedback on the utility of the programming layer change.

Removed kernel commands

It is very rare that commands are removed from the \LaTeX{} kernel. However, in this release we have elected to remove \GetDocumentCommandArgSpec, \GetDocumentEnvironmentArgSpec, \ShowDocumentCommandArgSpec and \ShowDocumentEnvironmentArgSpec from the kernel. These commands have been moved back to the “stub” xparse provided in l3packages. The reason for this change is that the removed commands exposed implementation details. They were essentially debugging tools which with hindsight should not have been made available directly in the kernel.

Changes to packages in the tools category

longtable: correct p-column definition

In general the longtable implementation follows the array usage but the package didn’t take over a change made 1992 in array which adjusted the handling of the strut inserted at the begin of p-columns. As a consequence there are a number of inconsistencies in the output of p-columns between tabular and longtable. This has been corrected; longtable now uses for the strut the same definition as array. (github issue 1128)

References

