Technical notes on the \texttt{amsmath} package

American Mathematical Society
Michael Downes
1999/10/29

1 Introduction
These notes are miscellaneous remarks on some technical questions applicable to version 2.0 of \texttt{AMS-LaTeX}.

2 Deprecated and disallowed commands
Certain commands that were in the \texttt{amstex} package (the predecessor, in \texttt{AMS-LaTeX} 1.0 and 1.1, of the \texttt{amsmath} package) were moved into \texttt{amsxtra} because they seemed to be little-used relics: \texttt{\accentedsymbol}, “sup accents” (\texttt{\sptilde}, \texttt{\sphat}, etc.).

Certain other commands—e.g., \texttt{\over}, \texttt{\pmatrix}, and \texttt{\cases}—are changed by the \texttt{amsmath} package to produce warning messages or error messages, depending on their history; these are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

3 Why do \texttt{\matrix}, \texttt{\pmatrix}, and \texttt{\cases} stop working when I add the \texttt{amsmath} package?
If you used the \texttt{plain.tex} versions of \texttt{\matrix}, \texttt{\pmatrix}, or \texttt{\cases} in a document and then later converted the document to use the \texttt{amsmath} package (or one of the AMS documentclasses, which automatically call the \texttt{amsmath} package internally), the instances of those commands will produce error messages. The problem is that when \LaTeX was originally created, it adopted most of its mathematics features straight from \texttt{plain.tex}. But in the case of \texttt{\matrix}, \texttt{\pmatrix}, \texttt{\cases} this was a mistake—the \texttt{plain.tex} syntax for them is decidedly non-\LaTeX in style, for example the fact that they use \texttt{\cr} instead of \texttt{\\} to mark line breaks, and they don’t use \texttt{\begin} and \texttt{\end}. In basic \LaTeX this mistake will be perpetuated at least until \LaTeX3 appears, in order to avoid breaking existing documents. But no existing documents that were written with the \texttt{amsmath} package have that syntactic problem, as \texttt{amsmath} provides proper \LaTeX-syntax versions of \texttt{\matrix} and the others. The possibility of optionally allowing the \texttt{plain.tex} variants to make document conversion easier seems ill-advised since those variants are so blatantly wrong in a \LaTeX context. The
array environment ought to have been used instead.

4 Why do \over, \atop, \above \[\ldots\text{withdelims}\]
give a warning when I add the amsmath package?

Using the six generalized fraction commands \over, \overwithdelims, \atop,
\atopwithdelims, \above, \abovewithdelims is not really a good idea in \LaTeX, for reasons explained below. I construe \LaTeX’s provision of \frac, and
the lack of any mention in the \LaTeX book of the primitive fraction commands,
as an implicit injunction against their use, although I don’t think Lamport actu-
ally spent a lot of time pondering the issue, and the basic \LaTeX version of \frac
provides access only to \over, not to \atop, \above, or the withdelims vari-
ants. The amsmath package, however, provides a \genfrac command that gives
user-level access to all six of the generalized fraction primitives in a way that
conforms to the syntactic conventions followed by all other \LaTeX commands.

Not only is the unusual syntax of the \TeX primitives rather out of place in
\LaTeX, but furthermore that syntax seems to be responsible for one of the most
significant flaws in \TeX’s mathematical typesetting capabilities: the fact that
the current mathstyle at any given point in a math formula cannot be deter-
dined until the end of the formula, because of the possibility that a following
generalized fraction command will change the mathstyle of the preceding mate-
rial. To cite two of the worst side effects: \mathchoice must actually typeset
all four of its arguments, instead of being able to immediately select only one;
and, were it possible to always know the current math style at a given point,
math font selection would be greatly simplified and the upper limit of 16 differ-
ent math font \fams would never be a problem as \text, script[script]font
assignments for any \fam could take immediate effect and therefore could be
changed arbitrarily often within a single formula. More concretely, math font
selection difficulties are responsible for many of the more convoluted passages
in the source code of \LaTeX’s NFSS (that does font loading on demand) and of
the amsmath package, and by extension it has historically been responsible for
significant delays in making new features available to end users and for making
those features more prone to bugs.

There are additional bad consequences following from the syntax of those
generalized fraction commands that only become evident when you do some
writing of nontrivial macros for math use. For example, as things currently
stand you cannot measure the size of any object in math without going through
\mathchoice and leaving and reentering math mode via \hbox{$(which then
introduces complications regarding \everymath and \mathsurround). And it
seems that uncertainty about the current mathstyle is the only barrier to al-
lowing the use of mu units with \vrule, to make vertical struts in constructing
compound symbols or notation. And so on and so forth.
5 The \texttt{fleqn} option and \texttt{\textbackslash mathindent}

Strictly speaking, the \texttt{amsmath} package doesn’t use \texttt{\textbackslash mathindent} to control the left indent of displayed equations when the \texttt{fleqn} option is in effect: it uses an internal parameter \texttt{\textbackslash mathmargin} instead. However, for compatibility with existing \LaTeX{} documentation, \texttt{amsmath} turns \texttt{\textbackslash mathindent} into an alias for \texttt{\textbackslash mathmargin}. There is a small risk here: In the plain \LaTeX{} implementation, \texttt{\textbackslash mathindent} is a dimen register, but with \texttt{amsmath} \texttt{\textbackslash mathmargin} is a skip register and, by association, so is \texttt{\textbackslash mathindent}. If any package or documentclass uses \texttt{\textbackslash mathindent} in a way that depends on it being a dimen register, when used in conjunction with the \texttt{amsmath} package it may be vulnerable to a well-known pitfall having to do with the primitive \TeX{} lookahead for a plus or minus key word. However if the standard \LaTeX{} commands \texttt{\textbackslash setlength} and \texttt{\textbackslash addtolength} are used to modify \texttt{\textbackslash mathindent} then this problem will not arise.

6 Why can’t I use abbreviations for \texttt{\begin{align}} ... \texttt{\end{align}}?

Authors often like to use abbreviations such as \texttt{\textbackslash beq \textbackslash eq} for \texttt{\begin{equation}} \texttt{\end{equation}}. For some environments defined by the \texttt{amsmath} package, such as \texttt{align}, \texttt{gather}, \texttt{multline}, and others of the same general type, this does not work: An attempt to define \texttt{\textbackslash bal \textbackslash eal} as shorthand for \texttt{\begin{align}} \texttt{\end{align}} will fail with a puzzling error message. This has to do with unfortunately nontrivial technical complications: the given environments must read their contents as a delimited macro argument because they do multipass processing of the contents using algorithms inherited from Spivak’s \texttt{amstex.tex}. The obvious solution—substitution of different algorithms that do box shuffling instead of token shuffling for the multipass calculations—would require rewriting these display environments from the ground up; while that is a worthy goal, it was beyond the original scope of the \texttt{\textbackslash AMS-\LaTeX} project. Work is under way on an auxiliary package called \texttt{breqn} that addresses not only this problem but a number of others; at the time of this writing, however [September 1999] it has only progressed as far as a beta release.

Some workarounds:

• \texttt{\textbackslash def\textbackslash bal\#1\textbackslash eal\texttt{\begin{align}\#1\texttt{\end{align}}}}
• Define \texttt{\textbackslash newcommand\texttt{\textbackslash env}[2]{{\textbackslash begin[1]#1}\texttt{\textbackslash end[#1]}} and then use \texttt{\textbackslash env\texttt{\{align\}...}}

7 The \texttt{upref} package

The reason for splitting out the \texttt{upref} package instead of automatically incorporating it in the \texttt{amsart} and \texttt{amsbook} classes is this: It involves low-level surgery on an important \LaTeX{} command. This means that if ever this command changes in the future (as it did between versions 2.09 and 2e of \LaTeX{}) we have a maintenance problem. And the benefit that \texttt{upref} provides is something that most end users don’t care much about.
8 The amsintx package

After a very preliminary trial release the amsintx package was withdrawn to await further development. It is still considered a worthy project but has simply not yet made it to the head of the priority queue in the AMS \LaTeX{} development program, as it has had to contend with a number of other equally worthy projects for development time.

9 Hyphenation in the documentation

Hyphenation was allowed for certain long command names in amsldoc.tex; this presented technical difficulties because \LaTeX{} normally deactivates hyphenation for tt fonts. The method chosen to reinstate hyphenation was to turn off the encoding-specific function \textbackslash OT1+cmtt that disables the \textbackslash hyphenchar for tt fonts; see the definition of \texttt{allowtthyphens} in amsdtx.dtx. Then a list of all tt words in the document was gathered (from the .idx file, produced by the \texttt{cn}, \texttt{fn}, \texttt{pkg}, etc. commands) and \texttt{showhyphens} was applied to this list. The result was another list in the resulting \TeX{} log, containing those words in a form suitable for the argument of \texttt{hyphenation}. That list was then edited by hand to overrule undesirable hyphenations; words with acceptable hyphenations were dropped from the list, as they don’t need to be repeated there.