

Old Wine In New Skins

ODF and OOXML represent a continuation of a dispute that is nearly as old as the markup paradigm itself. I don't know the date of the first argument over the use of elements (OOXML) versus attributes (ODF) to record document semantics. But I do know it was long ago and far away, only to be continued in the guises of OOXML and ODF.

OOXML represents the element side of the element side of the debate. For example, look at 17.3.1.15 KeepNext in ISO 29500, Part 1. This element has one attribute, a boolean attribute, which determines if its parent element (a paragraph) should be kept on the same page (if possible) as the preceding paragraph.

ODF, on the other hand, represents the attribute side of that debate. For the same ability in ODF, see ISO 26300 15.5.29, which uses fo:keep-with-next as an attribute in a style definition to achieve the same end.

It is important to note that what is over looked in the haste to join battle, is that those two statements are **semantically identical**. That is to say that whichever representation is chosen, the result displayed to the user is going to be the same.

I quite definitely prefer the attribute model, which is hardly surprising considering that I have been working in the ODF project for six years at this point. The main factor that I would point to as being its advantage is that I can change that style definition in one place and have it automatically change in all the places where that style has been used.

In partial defense of the element model, it easily supports a model where styles are assigned to paragraphs individually and to change those styles, all the paragraphs have to be selected for modification.

Or to put it another way, ODF defaults to treating a document globally through the use of attributes versus OOXML's default of treating a document as a series of formatted fragments. The success of both demonstrates that either model can meet the expectations of users but my point here is to illustrate that the respective formats are a continuation of a debate that is already nearly twenty years old.

If we are going to continue a twenty year old debate, let's at least make it a productive discussion this time around by comparing the semantics that are represented (or not) in the respective formats. Both formats are, after all, semantic claims about the documents produced by users. By better understanding the claims made by the "other" standard, we cannot help but improve our own.

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PS: This is an example of what I consider to be a "helpful" comment about ODF and OOXML.