Title: Clarify `strtoul`'s behavior on strings representing negative numbers

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Proposal category: Defect

Target audience: Implementers

Abstract: Clarify `strtoul` and related functions behavior on strings representing negative numbers

Prior art: C
Clarify `strtoul`'s behavior on strings representing negative numbers

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1.0 Introduction and Rationale

This paper is in response to MB/NC comment GB-232 [n3019]. AG Reference Bug 700 [AG700] describes the issue where `strtol` cannot return `LONG_MIN` with two’s complement long.

The description of `strtol`, `strtoll`, `strtoul`, and `strtoull` states:

Subclause 7.24.1.7, “The `strtol`, `strtoll`, `strtoul`, and `strtoull` functions” paragraph 5 states:

If the subject sequence begins with a minus sign, the value resulting from the conversion is negated (in the return type).

If the subject sequence begins with a minus sign, the value resulting from the conversion is negated; for functions whose return type is an unsigned integer type this negation is performed in the return type.

The parenthetical phrase "(in the return type)" was added in C99 in response to DR #006

This clarified the behavior of `strtoul` but broke `strtol`, because with two’s complement signed `long`, it is not possible to produce the value `LONG_MIN` by negating a positive value "in the return type".

A similar problem is also present in the `wcstol`* functions.

2.0 Proposed Solution

The following is our Normative reference for vocabulary:


ISO/IEC 2382:2015 provides the following definition:

2124091

negation

NOT operation

Boolean complementation
inversion

monadic Boolean operation whose result has the Boolean value opposite to that of the operand

Note 1 to entry: negation; NOT operation; Boolean complementation; inversion: terms and

Note 2 to entry: 02.05.17 (2382)

[SOURCE:ISO-2382-2 * 1976 * * * ]

There are two similar operations in C, both defined in Subclause 6.5.3.3, “Unary arithmetic
operators” that might be described by the term “negation”.

The first is logical negation operator !. The result of the logical negation operator ! is 0 if the value of
its operand compares unequal to 0, 1 if the value of its operand compares equal to 0. The result has
type int.

The second is the unary – operator. The unary minus operator operates on arithmetic types. in
Subclause 6.5.3.3, paragraph 5 states "The result of the unary –operator is the negative of its
(promoted) operand."

For strtol and related functions seems sensible to be consistent with the wording for the unary –
operator as this is the actual operation being performed and not logical negation.

3.0 Wording

Replace the following sentence from Subclause 7.24.1.7, “The strtol, strtoll, strtoul, and strtoull
functions” paragraph 5:

If the subject sequence begins with a minus sign, the value resulting from the conversion is negated
(in the return type).

with:

If the subject sequence begins with a minus sign, the resulting value is the negative of the converted
value; for functions whose return type is an unsigned integer type this action is performed in the
return type.

Replace the following sentence from Subclause 7.31.4.1.4, “The wcstol, wcstoll, wcstoul, and
wcstoull functions” paragraph 5:

If the subject sequence begins with a minus sign, the value resulting from the conversion is negated
(in the return type).

with:

If the subject sequence begins with a minus sign, the resulting value is the negative of the converted
value; for functions whose return type is an unsigned integer type this action is performed in the
return type.

4.0 Acknowledgements

I would like to recognize the following people for their help with this work: Jonathan Wakely, Aaron
Ballman, and Rajan Bhakta.
5.0 References

[AG700] AG Reference Bug 700

[DR #006] Defect Report #006

[n3019] Keaton, David. CD1 9899 ballot comments with progress from first week of ballot resolution.