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Newsletter - Community

Language Standards for Commerce and Communication

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We are in the year 2006, and the only common, indisputable standard in the language industry, it seems, is money. Everything else " from communications through technical specifications, tools, processes, and expectations to language quality itself " is proprietary and can't be measured because it varies by client, supplier, and sometimes even by individual. They say you can't fix what you can't measure, so are we doomed to live with broken language standards?

Without standards, modern language-service professionals aren't much better off than ancient traders bartering colorful shells and stones among each other, while routinely trading away diamonds for shiny beads and shallow flattery. Acronyms claiming to be standards are commonly bandied about, but the acronyms do little to actually standardize how we work. Service providers and clients nowadays are still a lot like the ancients, struggling to agree with their neighbors about how to measure distance or weight. Are we really satisfied constantly explaining how "unique" our processes, communications, and quality metrics are?

Why We Need Standards

If a customer wants language services performed in a particular way, who are language service suppliers to argue with them? As long as the customer and supplier agree, who needs standards anyhow? As conditions and specifications change, so do customer requirements and measures. Without standards, service suppliers literally bend and twist with every requirement of the industry, customer, and individual. It's like retooling the factory every time a new order comes in. With standards, customers and suppliers must still agree on business conditions, but they will also have rules that they both abide by, objective measures of performance, and guarantors of predictable outcomes. Language services need these elements as much as any other professional services, maybe even more so because the output is often unintelligible to the immediate customer.

Some members of our community claim that language services are unique so they simply can't be standardized. They assert that translation is an art and a craft, and they cite the lack of existing uniform language requirements as proof that it is impossible to standardize language. But this circular logic only reinforces the notion that our industry is underdeveloped (and therefore undervalued). Modern, commercial language services are built on technology and systems; most of the language work done by the world's language service suppliers is technical in nature and heavily structured. Creating and applying language standards is challenging, but far from impossible or superfluous.

Others argue that creating uniform language requirements will commoditize language services. Advocates of this point of view feel that standardization favors the person sitting on the other side of the transaction. They believe that introducing uniform language requirements (ULR) will further commoditize the language industry and will work against industry professionals and smaller language service providers. We believe it is time to recognize that the lack of uniform language requirements degrades the value of language professionals' work, lowers the barrier to entry to an unacceptably low level, and causes noise. The inability to agree on quality metrics makes business processes vulnerable, unstable, and expensive, and prevents clients and suppliers from distinguishing different service levels.

The bottom line is that the lack of uniform language requirements makes project architecture and costing difficult and difficult to compare. This inhibits outsourcing, and goes against global business principles. The absence of these requirements prevents us from broadening the scope of language services into areas that are currently uneconomical – many companies don't translate anything at all, most translate only a fraction of the content that might be valuable in other markets, and less-spoken languages tend to get left behind. Even attempts at machine translation to fill these gaps are stymied by the lack of standards, in source content, process, and output formats. At the same time, the absence of uniform language requirements devalues unique language and process quality achievements.

We think it's high time for us to actively pursue standard metrics for process and product quality.

GALA Moves toward Uniform Language Requirements

At its annual meeting in Montreal on 16 October 2006, the Globalization and Localization Association (GALA) pressed for realistic, usable language requirements and widespread implementation by Language Service Providers (LSPs). The Montreal session built on the momentum of past discussions at GALA meetings, insights from the Language Standards for Global Business (LSGB) summits in December 2005 and May 2006, and other

member activities.

The Montreal session was moderated by LSGB creators Don DePalma of Common Sense Advisory, Hans Fenstermacher of Translations.com, and Kim Harris of Text & Form. DePalma noted that "to get the adoption coverage, the standards-setting bodies need to hear what users of various standards and specifications think about what is usable and what's not. GALA represents the biggest user community, language service providers; we consolidate the voices of over 215 language service providers worldwide."

A survey of GALA members at the annual meeting revealed a high level of interest and concern in technical standards such as TMX and Unicode. "We reviewed the survey results and found that technology providers need to drive greater interoperability," said Fenstermacher. GALA members across Systems GmbH, Clay Tablet, and Idiom Technologies agreed to lead a discussion on technology and middleware standards.

The Montreal working group will document GALA member requirements for usable language standards. GALA will send ULR specifications to all standards-setting bodies and post them on the Wiki for Standards. The Wiki will create an open community for the discussion of standards and specifications and serve as a collection point for all information about language quality and technology standards. GALA will also seek to establish direct representation within the appropriate standard-setting bodies.

"The Wiki provides another way for standards bodies and potential users to talk to each other, without having to get on a plane for yet another conference," said Beatriz Bonnet, president and CEO of Syntes Language Group and the American Translators Association representative to the ASTM translation standard committee and to ISO Technical Committee 37, Subcommittee 37, Workgroup 6 on translation and interpreting standards. Bonnet said that "the international organizations that I work with will happily accept the input of GALA members as they develop standards."

Next Steps

As the largest organization of language service providers, GALA's standards committee will take a leading role in introducing uniform language requirements (ULRs). It plans to:

- Develop a uniform taxonomy and methodology of GALA ULRs to handle the entire range of industry metrics and standards of various entities, getting the language industry players on the same page. Table 1 represents a preliminary overview of this taxonomy.
- Collect GALA member feedback to develop ULR specifications approved and recognized by GALA member community.
- Participate in dissemination, adoption and recognition of ULRs.
- Connect GALA members and standard setting bodies to provide a communication channel and link between service providers, standard-setting bodies, and users of language service products.

Table 1: Preliminary Taxonomy of Language Specifications (Source: GALA)

Type		Name	Organization
Markup, authoring, and tech info delivery	Markup Metalanguage	XML	Extensible Markup Language is a flexible text format derived from SGML (ISO 8879) for large-scale electronic publishing and data exchange.
	Commercial	DITA	Darwin Information Typing Architecture builds content reuse into the authoring process, defining an XML architecture for designing, writing, managing, and publishing many kinds of information in print and on the Web.
	Government	S1000D	Specification for technical publications utilizing a common source database
Character Representation		Unicode	Provides a unique number for every character, no matter what the platform, no matter what the program, no matter what the language.

Language Codes		ISO 639	A code that aims to define three-letter identifiers for all known human languages.
Machine Translation		OLIF	The Open Lexicon Interchange Format is an open standard for lexical/terminological data encoding.
Multilingual Data Exchange		XLIFF	XML localization interchange file format
Quality	Interpreting Services	ASTM F2809-01	Identifies the components of quality language interpretation services and establishes criteria for each component
	Language Services	GB/T 19363.1-2003	Specification for translation service (PRC)
	Translation Services	ASTM F2575-06	Identifies factors relevant to the quality of language translation services for each phase of a translation project
		CEN EN15038	Describes and defines the entire translation process
	Metrics	LISA QA Model	Manage the quality assurance process for all the components in a localized product, including functionality, documentation and language issues.
		SAE J2450	Quality metric for language translation of service information
		GMX	Family of proposed standards concerning translation-related metrics for volume, complexity, and quality
Terminology	Representation	TBX	XML-based standard format for terminological data
	Data	ISO 12620	Data categories
	Markup	ISO DIS 16642	Terminological markup
	Glossary	ISO 1087	Standard for glossary terminology
	Language Resources Management	ISO TC37/SC2/WG6	Standardization of principles, methods and applications relating to terminology and other language and content resources in the contexts of multilingual communication and cultural diversity

Translation Memory	Segmentation	SRX	XML-based standard for description of the ways in which translation and other language-processing tools segment text for processing
	Exchange	TMX	XML-based standard for the exchange of Translation Memory (TM) data created by computer-aided translation (CAT) and localization tools
Workflow		WfMC	Standards for workflow, process interchange, and business process management.

Don DePalma is the founder and chief research officer of the research and consulting firm [Common Sense Advisory](#), and author of the premier book on business globalization *Business Without Borders: A Strategic Guide to Global Marketing*.

Hans Fenstermacher is Vice President of [Translations.com](#), a leading language-service provider, and founding Chairman of GALA.

Serge Gladkoff is the founder and President of [Logrus International](#), a 14-year-old multilingual language service provider. Serge graduated with honors from Moscow Engineering and Physics Institute in 1999 with a BA in Physics. From April 1986 to May 1992, he was Vice President of Dialogue-Mephi; from May 1992 to July 1993, he was Localization Manager at Borland International. Serge is the chair of GALA's Standards Committee.

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