

So...Is There a Good Thing About Standards?

By Beatriz Bonnet

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In his February 2006 article about standards (“The Good Thing About Standards Is...”), ATA Secretary Alan Melby summarized the first Language Standards for Global Business Conference, held in Berlin, Germany, December 12-13, 2005. As ATA’s representative to the ASTM International Technical Subcommittee F15.48 on Translation Standards, I attended this standards conference and spoke about the ASTM standard during a session devoted to translation quality management standards. A colleague from the European Standards Committee (CEN) Task Force on translation standards presented the CEN standard. While Alan’s earlier article focused mostly on the data or technical standards affecting our industry, this article will provide further information on translation quality management standards.

ATA’s Involvement in Translation Quality Management Standards

ATA was one of the main drivers in starting a technical subcommittee within ASTM for the purpose of defining translation quality standards. ASTM International, as it is known today, is one of the main standards development bodies in the U.S. and the world.¹ About eight years ago, some ATA members felt that the association needed to define quality and quality standards. At the same time, the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) also perceived a need for quality standards. Wisely, instead of working only within ATA or NFLC, both organizations realized that a standard would be stronger if it were developed in a more objective and representative body, such as ASTM, instead of within the closed realm of a professional organization. Thus, ATA has been represented on ASTM Technical Subcommittee F15.48 since the start of this effort.

In the last few years, other efforts have been initiated to develop translation quality standards. In order to keep abreast of other developments, ATA also sought representation within the CEN effort, and was granted observer status in 2004. ATA was also represented at the 2005 Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT) Congress in Tampere, Finland, where a session was dedicated to standards presentations and discussions, including the ASTM and CEN standards, but also standards from China and Russia.

There has been a noticeable increase in both activity and the level of interest in standards work, and ATA has been and continues to be represented nationally and internationally. In the last two years, industry conferences that have not addressed standards previously now offer sessions focusing on this subject, and our association has been represented at many of these events. By the time you read this article, ATA will have participated in another international panel at the second Language Standards for Global Business Conference, held May 29-30 in Barcelona, Spain. A future article will provide a report on this conference.

Why Bother with Standards? Don’t We All Know How to Produce Excellent Translation Quality Already?

Why has there been such a great interest in developing standards for our industry in the last few years? In part, it may be the result of the inevitable globalization of most industries. Translators and interpreters in particular may even be at the forefront of globalization—after all, without us globalization could not even happen. There may be other reasons, but in working with people from many different countries and representing different interests, here are some recurring themes. Based on this experience and many one-on-one conversations with different stakeholders, the main reasons for standards development can be boiled down to the following, in no particular order:

- Obtaining greater transparency in the marketplace: if the guidelines in a given standard are used, translation service providers will understand what they should do and buyers will understand what they are buying.
- Obtaining better quality: both providers and buyers of translation services can benchmark their activities and process against an objective standard.
- Market differentiation: those providers who perform their services according to the standard can use this to their advantage in the marketplace when compared to providers who do not follow the standard.
- Educational tool: standards can help in client education and in the creation of curricula to train translation service providers, both for academic institutions and for the training of translators and other stakeholders within private industry or government and nonprofit entities.
- Leveling the playing field: all translation service providers will have access to the same standard so they and their clients can play by the same rules.
- Certification according to a standard equals a seal of approval: some buyers may see certification according to a particular standard as a seal of approval or a guarantee that a service provider delivers quality (it should be noted that not all standards contemplate certification). People will have different motivations for working on a translation quality management standard, and, as you can see, some of the reasons outlined above seem to contradict each other.

The Work of Creating and Publishing a Standard

Why do we need to talk about the work involved in creating and publishing a standard? The importance of how the work gets done becomes evident once we understand why a standard becomes what it is: a document written by a committee and, therefore, a product of compromise.

Standards are typically developed by a group of people, usually with input from an even larger group of people. Who these people are, who they represent, and how they work together varies widely depending on the standard being developed. For a side-by-side comparison of the ASTM Technical Subcommittee F15.48 on Translation Quality Standards and the CEN 138 “Translation Services,” please see the table on the following page.

Yes, the work was long and tedious and the discussions often seemed to last forever with no clear results in sight. Ultimately, the work performed in a committee will always be the result of putting an idea forward, having the group discuss it, and either adopting it or instead adopting a different idea resulting from the discussion. The final document will never represent the work of one person or the views of just one constituency, but the consensus of all involved. Although the final published document is unlikely to please everyone completely, it has the advantage of representing the interests of the different stakeholders. This is certainly true for the ASTM standard, where, for example, the very strong views of government stakeholders clearly influenced entire sections of the standard, making it much more usable and worthwhile for government clients, who represent the largest buyer of translation services in the United States.

Just a Bit About the Standards

Additional articles about the ASTM and CEN standards providing much more information will be published in future issues of *The ATA Chronicle*. For now, here is some basic information about the standards.

The CEN standard is a concise standard with a focus on the qualifications of the translation service provider (defined as either a translation company or an individual translator). It also covers the translation process and the relationship between the client and the translation service provider. Partly because of the compromises mentioned earlier, some very useful information is provided only in the form of informative annexes to the standard itself, which is normative. A provider must comply with the normative parts of a standard.

The ASTM standard is longer than the CEN standard—which arguably makes it harder to read—and provides more detailed information, especially in some sections. For instance, in order to provide thorough information to a reader new to translation, the ASTM standard defines over 40 industry terms. The ASTM standard focuses on specifications and process, and defines quality as a translation that meets the specifications agreed upon up front by the requester and the translation service provider. Similarly to the CEN standard, the ASTM standard defines the translation service provider as a translation company, an individual translator, or even an in-house translation department. It also covers the qualifications of translation service providers, but the focus is on supplying guidance to requesters and providers so they can agree on the proper specifications and the process to be used to perform the services.

Comparison of the Working Process of ASTM and CEN Standards Development Groups

Question	ASTM	CEN
Who wrote the standard?	A drafting committee of approximately five to eight people worked on this over several years (currently five members), representing translation providers (including ATA), academia, government, and translation buyers.	The entire CEN Task Force attended the pertinent meetings and a secretary recorded all the information. The task force was comprised of country delegations from approximately 25 European countries plus observers (including ATA). Country delegations

		typically included one or two members of the translation industry (usually one representing companies, one representing freelance translators) and one member of that country's standards body. A few delegations also included buyers of translation services or companies with internal translation departments.
Who reviewed and provided feedback on the standard?	A multitude of people worked on this over the years, including members of the ASTM Technical Subcommittee F15.48 on Translation Quality Standards who were not actively part of the smaller drafting committee, as well as ATA (through its Board and other members), government, and translation buyers, with feedback given directly to members of the drafting committee.	Each country's delegation took the drafts back to their standards bodies and associations for review and feedback, which they then brought back to the next task force meeting.
How was the voting process conducted?	Under ASTM rules, a standard first has to pass subcommittee balloting and then have an affirmative vote of the larger committee (in our case, F15 on Consumer Products). Both votes have been affirmative and the final editorial changes have been completed. The standard will be published very soon.	Votes were taken throughout the writing of the document during the task force meetings to accept or reject changes. Once the draft was completed, it went through a public inquiry process whereby all the countries' standards bodies cast their vote (affirmative, with comments to be resolved). Once all the comments were addressed, the committee held a final public inquiry, which was positive. The standard will be published very soon.
How was the work performed?	Work was performed mainly by the drafting committee, which has changed over the years, with a core remaining for most of the process. Work took place in person, in smaller workgroups, through long conference calls,	Work was done in person during scheduled task force meetings around Europe. Each meeting lasted two or three days. All writing was done at the meetings and typing was done in real time with the text being projected on a large screen.

	and individually, with comments and revisions given off-line by individual team members. The process involved suggestions, discussions, consensus, and compromise.	Like the process within the ASTM committee, there were lots of suggestions and discussions before the members ultimately arrived at a compromise. Formal votes were taken for every point.
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What the Future Holds

No, I do not have a crystal ball, but I will do my best to predict the future anyway. Thankfully, there are others who have a similar vision of the future in terms of standards. Now that several standards are either published or soon to be published, there will be a push by at least some stakeholders to start using the standards in a practical way and to seek wide adoption. However, given the international nature of our profession and our industry, there is bound to be some conflict among the standards. The following is a situation that is likely to happen. Imagine that you or your company does work for a U.S. subsidiary of a European company and also directly for that company's European operations. Which standard are you supposed to use? American, European, or both? And when the translation is finished, does it go to an editor or a reviser? Are they one and the same or different people? This is not clear because the wording differs between the two standards. And what if you also localize for the Chinese market? This introduces yet another standard into the equation.

A common international standard is needed, particularly for our industry. Informal conversations have already started regarding an international standard that will not be just American and European, but will also include the rest of the world. We need to involve representatives from other continents in order to create a truly international standard that all stakeholders can use to improve and benchmark their practices. The panel discussions that took place in Spain during the Language Standards for Global Business Conference will move this conversation forward in a very open forum.

As your ATA representative to ASTM Committee F15.48 and to ISO Technical Committee 37, Subcommittee 2, Work Group 6 on translation quality management standards, I welcome your comments and suggestions. Above all, I hope you will use the ASTM standard and that you will find it helpful to talk to your clients, find a common vocabulary with which to communicate, find ways to improve your practice, or even come up with new ideas to try or areas in which to expand your knowledge and expertise. Those interested in the ASTM standard can purchase F2575-06 Standard Guide for Quality Assurance in Translation from the ASTM website (www.astm.org) for \$40.

My next article will report on the Barcelona conference and explain how the ASTM standard can benefit different types of ATA members—translators, editors, project managers, translation companies, language services sales representatives, translation teachers, and members of in-house translation teams.

Notes

1. More information on ASTM International can be found at www.astm.org.

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