A standard for simplified natural language.

Richard Hodgkinson reports on plans for a new ISO standard.

In my standards article in the Spring "Communicator" I reported on a proposal for a new international standard that would address Simplified English. The proposal has now been accepted and development of multipart standard ISO 24620 is now underway in ISO/TC 37/SC 4/WG 5 - Terminology and other language and content resources - Language resource management - Workflow of language resource management.

UK participation in this standard is being managed by British Standards Institution committee TS/1 (Terminology).

If you would like to participate in this work, i.e. review the drafts, provide content and comments, please contact Beverley Webb, the TS/1 secretary, at Beverley.Webb@bsi.group.com. You will also need to provide a nomination from the ISTC together with a brief biography. I will not be participating directly in this work, but will report on progress in the "Communicator"

So, what's it all about?

Bearing in mind that the work is in its initial stages, to provide more information on its purpose and intended content, here are the Introduction and Scope from an early Working Draft. Please note that they may be modified as the standard progresses.

Introduction

"The volume of technical documentation and other kinds of special purpose language (SPL) texts is increasing in the course of an ever growing number of products and services to be described in sometimes many different languages for experts, experienced users or general users being potential users of these products and services. Therefore, translation, localization and other approaches– not to mention automatic translation of different sorts – use computerized methods to accelerate the time to market, while at the same time improving the quality of texts and their consistency across different language versions. On the one hand readability and understandability are key factors of user-friendliness and, therefore, decisive in market penetration. On the other hand, the quality of the original text and that of its different language versions may become subject to liability.

Natural language permits a great amount of expressive variation. Writers, especially technical writers, tend to develop their special vocabularies and jargons, styles, and grammatical constructions. Thus technical language can become opaque not just to ordinary readers, but to experts as well. The problem becomes particularly acute when such text is translated into other languages, since the translator may not even be an expert in the technical domain.

To counter the tendency of writers to use unusual or overly-specialized, inconsistent language, simplified language approaches have been developed, which also cover some aspects of controlled languages (CL). Simplified language approaches started off from simplified English, which was developed by the aerospace industry and its customers to help the preparation of maintenance manuals that are both clear and unambiguous for English speakers and non-native English speakers alike. The specification provides a set of writing rules and a dictionary of agreed words with their meanings. Today these approaches are applied also to other languages, while at the same time computer-assisted approaches in this field increasingly need to become interoperable and the resulting texts in several or many language versions to become re-usable for an array of complementary uses.

This situation calls for language independent general rules and principles, which may have to be complemented by language dependent rules and principles as well as the necessary language and content resources. This International Standard responds to the needs of multilingual approaches in translation and localization of technical documentation and, therefore, focuses on the general rules and principles of simplified natural language(s)."

Scope

"General rules and principles concerning simplified natural languages facilitate:

- Reducing ambiguity;
- Speeding up reading;
- Improving comprehension for people whose first language is not the language of the document at hand;
- Improving comprehension for people with different domain or application background;

- Human translation and localization to become easier, faster and more cost effective;
- Computer-assisted translation and machine translation.
- Re-usability of language resources in larger application scenarios, like Semantic Web or decision-support systems;

The general rules and principles of this standard constitute a systematic approach that makes cross-language and cross-domain as well cross-system applications of simplified natural languages more effective."

Richard Hodgkinson FISTC has participated in the development of ISO, ISO/IEC and European standards addressing icons, symbols, software documentation, pen gestures and ICT accessibility since 1990. His is also an Associate Lecturer to the MA Technical Communications course at the University of Portsmouth. E: Richard_Hodgkinson@btinternet.com