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ASTM committee on language services' inaugural meeting

Uwe Muegge
Melissa Taing

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Guest blog entry by Uwe Muegge, Chief Terminologist and Co-Director of MedL10N at CSOFT

In my opinion, one key characteristic of a mature industry is the availability of a comprehensive set of established best practices, typically in the form of national or international standards.

Since its beginning in 1898, the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) has been a leading provider of standards in a wide array of industries. ASTM's standards development process is founded on a full-consensus system that invites discussion, collaboration, and a commitment to quality; members from around the world collectively develop and maintain standards in their respective areas of expertise.

Last year, ASTM formed the ASTM Committee F43 to focus on standards specific to language services and products. The current 39 members of the committee will work together to support existing standards for interpretation, translation, language instruction and language proficiency as needed. This also includes modifying performance standards to better adapt to health care and court environments, and focusing on the cultural and language needs of employees in foreign countries. At the same time, the committee also intends to develop standards for language training, foreign language proficiency among students, and performance testing.

The committee's first meeting was held on February 17th at the University of Maryland's National Foreign Language Center in College Park, MD. More than 75 representatives from U.S. government agencies, private sector companies, and academic and professional organizations attended. The primary agenda items were setting up the five subcommittees, electing officers, and establishing initial meetings for each of the following subcommittees:

- F43.01 Language Interpreting

- F43.02 Foreign Language Interpreting

- F43.03 Foreign Language Translation

- F43.04 Language Proficiency

- F43.05 Executive

With CSOFT's position as a translation service provider, I participated in subcommittee F43.03. The other members of this subcommittee included representatives from Brigham Young University, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, Kent State University, LionBridge, and Syntes Language Group. The members elected Steve Lank, the previous chair of the Subcommittee F15.48 that developed the F2575 standard, as chair of the Translation subcommittee. The first meeting resulted in submitting the following key recommendations for initial activities to the plenum:

- Careful assessment of existing standards to avoid duplication

- Recruitment of additional members who specialize in translation tools

- Recruitment of additional members from the corporate translation buyer community

I can only speak for myself, but I left this first F43 meeting highly energized and inspired. With representatives from a wide variety of organizations from both the translation vendor and the translation buyer side, and with a mandate to include new members from currently underrepresented types of organizations, I am very optimistic that F43 will be in an excellent position to develop relevant new standards for our rapidly evolving industry.

On a more personal note, I really enjoyed attending this meeting not only because it marked the starting point of a unique initiative that in all likelihood will help advance the translation industry to the next level of professionalism, but also because it was a wonderful opportunity to meet a number of old friends and colleagues, including Alan Melby and Sue Ellen Wright (it turned out Sue Ellen is as big a fan of Chipotle-style burritos as am I!). Finally, I want to share a photo with you that I took on my way back during the layover at Chicago O'Hare that gives you a good impression of my state of mind after a long day of meetings and little sleep during the red-eye flight to and from Baltimore (I arrived home at 2:30AM on Friday). It was quite the trip, but well worth it for many reasons.

A psychedelic rendering of the light tunnel under Terminal 1 at O'Hare International Airport, designed by German expatriate Helmut Jahn (aka Flash Gordon).