SCV– CONTRIBUTION 2010-1

Source:	CANADA
Title:	Contribution to Standardization Committee for Vocabulary: Guidance on drafting definitions

Background

The Standardization Committee for Vocabulary (SCV) has identified a need for additional guidance for the study groups on how to draft definitions.   This contribution identifies some issues on this topic for consideration by the SCV.

Much time is spent on definitions by Study Groups but the results are often duplicative and of inconsistent or poor quality. Greater consistency is needed in the way definitions are drafted and consideration also needs to be given to issues related to the automated compilation and processing of definitions by TSB staff. Annex 2 to WTSA Resolution 67 (Johannesburg, 2008), *Guidelines for the preparation of terms and definitions* is a good beginning towards an overall guidance document but it needs to be somewhat enhanced. The remainder of this contribution addresses some topics that need to be considered in the development of further guidance as well as the need to ensure such guidance is appropriately promulgated.

1.   Style and audience

In developing the guidance, the primary target audience (i.e. those who draft Recommendations) must be kept constantly in mind. For the most part, the targeted audience comprises technical experts who often have little time or tolerance for extraneous material. Therefore, the guidance needs to be concise and to-the-point, otherwise it will likely be missed or ignored.

2.   Promulgation

The resulting guidance needs not only to be brought initially to the attention of Chairs, Rapporteurs and Editors, but also to be kept in the forefront of all drafting/editing activities, perhaps by periodic reminders from TSB. With a bit of persuasion, everyone could do much better job of drafting definitions.

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3.   Use of existing terminology

Standards developers waste much time on terminology development. While it is important that definitions accurately capture the subject concept or term, experience has shown that terminology discussions frequently occupy an unreasonable amount of technical meeting time. One way to reduce unnecessary discussion is to use already-defined terms.

Drafters should be discouraged from developing new terms where an acceptable definition already exists. Also, already-existing terms should not be re-defined. Existing glossaries should be consulted before a new term is defined to see if the term/concept has already been defined. Only if no satisfactory definition exists should a new definition be considered. When defining a new term/concept, the name used for the term should not duplicate the name used for an already-defined term/concept.

4.   Conciseness of definitions

It is important to emphasize the requirement for conciseness of definitions. ITU definitions should not be considered an encyclopedic description or an explanation. "The main purpose of a definition's is not to provide a means for a complete understanding of a given concept but rather to provide enough understanding so as to avoid confusing the concept in question with other related concepts." [ISO 704]

 ISO 704 states "Complex definitions shall contain only information that makes the concept unique; any additional descriptive information deemed necessary is to be included in a note." This notion should be captured in the ITU guidance. (See also point 7).

5.   Complex terms

The WTSA guidance states: "A complex term should reflect the combination of concepts included in the definition. However, it need not include every constituent of the combination of concepts shown in the definition." This is at odds with the ISO guidance which says: "A definition shall describe only one concept. It shall not include hidden definitions of other concepts." We suggest that ISO position on this is preferable. There are too many instances of definitions becoming a confused jumble of concepts.

6.   Use of supplementary information in a definition

ISO 704 discusses the notion of supplementary information (i.e. non-normative, non-essential information) for differentiating the defined term or concept from other terms/concepts. Such supplementary information includes:
 − notes;
 − concept descriptions;
 − encyclopedic descriptions;
 − explanations;
 − examples; and
 − defining contexts.

Such discussion may prove helpful in the ITU guide and guidance on the use of figures and diagrams could also be included in such a section.

7   What is meant by definition

Section 2.1 of the WTSA guidance explains a definition as follows:

"To define is to state clearly, accurately and precisely what is a concept."

The notion of conciseness is missing from this explanation. Also, "accurately" and "precisely" seem to be saying the same thing. Moreover, a noun should not be defined in terms of a verb. We suggest a better definition would be: "A definition is a clear, concise and accurate statement that states the precise meaning of a term or concept."

8.   Accuracy of definitions

Clause 2.3 of the WTSA guidance deals with accuracy of definitions. It states:

"The degree of accuracy of definitions may depend on their intended use. Attempts to achieve greater accuracy may lengthen the text unnecessarily. This may involve the use of more specific and hence less familiar terms, thereby making the definition harder rather than easier to understand."

We recommend adding that circular, inaccurate and negative definitions are not acceptable and that the definition should not be a paraphrase of the term.

9.   Formulation of definitions

In clause 2.4 of the WTSA guidance it is stated that:

"The wording of the definition should clearly indicate whether the term is a substantive noun, a verb or an adjective"

It should be expressly stated that the form of the definition should also be the same part of speech as the term or concept being defined.

10. Default definitions

Where undefined terms are used in a Recommendation, there should be a common default to an internationally-recognized vocabulary.

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