Chapter V

Situated Discourse and Essential Terms

...communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.

—James Carey, 1989

INTRODUCTION

The research for this work is based on the thesis that standardization is moving from public formal bodies to more private consortia. A relevant question is why? Another basic question is what do these key words mean? In any case, the approach taken in this study is analysis of historical and current discourses about standardization from the perspective of a separate discourse about privatization, the enclosure discourse. The latter discourse was examined in the previous chapters to establish a perspective for analysis. This chapter seeks to identify the essential terms of the discourse of standards and standardization and to establish meanings. First, however, it is useful to briefly note the way in which much of the current standards discourse is situated and how it has been researched.
FIELD RESEARCH METHOD

Although this is not an ethnographic study, the research method used was inspired, by Geertz’s classic account of the *Balinese cockfight* (Geertz, 1973, pp. 412-453) \(^1\) There may be some similarity between standards committee meetings and cockfights, and the cultural dimensions are no less complex and determinative. As an anthropologist, Geertz sought to gain an understanding of cultural meaning by participating in specific social practices, and by doing so by becoming somewhat of an “insider.” By taking the same risks as local villagers, rather than remaining detached, he was able to gain acceptance by, and access to, the participants and their practices. In this Geertz was able to discern the cultural meanings involved in various rituals and activities. The Balinese cockfight is a highly ritualized competition that gives insights into the Balinese culture. My approach here is somewhat similar, having been already accepted as a standards “warrior;” an insider who works on standards, administers committee activities, and struggles in the same highly ritualized battles as those that I study.

Much of the discourse discussed in this work was acquired by attending academic and industry conferences and actual standards meetings in which many of the principal actors in the discourse participated. This includes seventeen separate gatherings taking place over a three-year period. A list of these gatherings is provided in the Appendix. Since the author is personally known to many of the participants, it proved to be fruitful to rely on informal, unstructured interviews and discussions in hallways over coffee, around dinner or luncheon tables, and other similar situations. Using this method, the artificiality of structured questionnaires or interviews was absent and did not tilt the answers or inhibit voluntary comments. Although it became common knowledge among the participants at these gatherings that the author was engaged in academic research on standardization, it was also known that the author was attending not solely for research purposes. The author often spoke on, or was a member on, panels dealing with the topic of standards research, or actually was engaged in setting standards. This posture created a fruitful and candid atmosphere that minimized the distortion or biasing of the research data because the researcher was also an insider, a *bona fide* participant. What such an insider perspective provided was access to key elements of the discourse, both verbal and written, and the ability to contextually assess their relative importance in ways that an outside observer might find difficult. The author was able to make effective use of his own knowledge, familiarity, and contacts to get past many of the barriers that exist for outsiders attempting such a study. An example might be candid discussions between the author and participant(s) that would not have been undertaken with an outsider.
A Step Towards the Adoption of Standards Within the UK Ministry of Defence