

SPECIFICATIONS: COMPILATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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In a way it is amazing that we are able to produce coherent and understandable specifications! When you consider the sources of our information, and the multitude of "languages" and the disparity of voices, it is a wonder we are ever able to building a project.

CSI long ago saw wisdom in creating the guidelines for "specifications language"--the clipped, streamlined, foreshortened expressions we now use. And which in some quarters are misunderstood, mysterious, and questioned. Some see us speaking with sparse and incomplete verbiage mainly used to "trick" contractor and other construction professionals. We, however, know better (and might find value in making our position clearer within the industry!)

Do ASTM, ANSI, ACI, SMACNA, NCMA, BIA, and the multiplicity of other construction information sources speak our language? No, not really! They write and speak with their own "take" on topics, and using what to them is standardized terminology and vernacular. Best we learn all the variations (as part of professional education?--uh, yea!)

The mind-boggling trove of information regarding construction is so massive, intricate, and overwhelming *that few, if any of us know all the sources and the quirks and nuances presented by each*. There is ALWAYS something else, that we miss. To compound things, the trades use other information and standards in training and developing their workers. And unfortunately, they and we are on parallel courses, each correct in its way, but "nary the twain shall meet"!

Who do we talk to via our specifications—the absolute final end-users? What language do they "normally" use, and how does it differ from ours? We are still mired in the era of "cement" really means "concrete"; "iron" often means "steel"; "Sheetrock" or "rock" really means gypsum wallboard. "Spud" here is not a potato! "Crete" is not necessarily the island in the Mediterranean! ASTM lists reports, test procedures and standards like, "Standard Practice for Specimen Preparation and Mounting of Textile, Paper or Vinyl Wall or Ceiling Coverings to Assess Surface Burning Characteristics"! What? How does that impact--perhaps--my wall covering selection?

Most specs tell us NOT to furrow bed joints in masonry. Bricklayer training guides note "...take tip of trowel and create furrow in the bed joint mortar..... Who's right? Specs snafu? Uh, we need a meeting of the minds!

Each of us can blow the other away by merely talking our talk and not even attempting to accommodate the other "foreign" language pertinent to the situation. We speak from different podiums and with different biases, viewpoints, and opinions. From experience we fast-forward what we know that works and is proper, and then convert this into our specifications speak. Also, experience also teaches that others speak with different tongue biased by their specific perspective, information, knowledge and intent. The mix requires, as you well know, a masterful control of it all for the production of coherent and appropriate documents. Here CSI, as well as the individual efforts of us all, have come to bring sense to our profession.

Each day we need to be mindful of this-- and this must also be a major hallmark in any teaching, instruction or training we do. In other forums there has been talk of a "specifications comparison". You know that really is a good idea and not a frivolous thought or musing. We all "need to get out more" to overcome our "habitual" production of specifications--that mundane, yawning, let's do it again mindset that drives us. We all might be the better if we could see how others "speak" via their specifications, and how they display their information to attract due attention and encourage productive use of the work.