

# The Object of Subjects: Some Basics of Subject Cataloguing

*Philip Harvey*

Apparently there are those amongst us who question the need for having subject headings at all. The standard reasons given are (i) you can find everything you need via keyword searches, (ii) refer back to one!

Before I begin then, I will justify my existence by explaining the benefits and necessity of having subject headings. The general view is that subject headings provide access to materials that cannot always be found by title, author or keyword searches. By selecting common terms for broad areas of knowledge as well as specific terms, and structuring them, the cataloguer makes available a readier form of access to a wider range of relevant material.

## **Keyword Searching**

Keyword searching, also called natural-language or free-text searching, has advantages. It may retrieve information from any linked sources and can retrieve works that use new terminology. However the reply to keyword search argument is simple: words in a title and even in tables of contents do not always give a useful lead to the precise subject of the book. Indeed, the sources can be quite misleading.

To believe that the subject of your search will appear in every title in a catalogue is to misunderstand the academic delight in weird and wonderful names for books. It leans heavily on the proposition that people will always be literal in the way they say things. It also presumes that authors include in a title all the main subjects of their work, something that is all too often not the case.

Other disadvantages of keyword as the sole subject search device are that you must also search for synonymous words to find everything, even the plurals of the words involved, and also that your sources may not contain any words that indicate relevant subject content.

## **Subject Searching**

The other way of searching by subject is through words and phrases in assigned index terms, also called controlled vocabulary access. This structured approach to subjects (i.e. subject headings) has these advantages:

- It draws together all relevant materials on the one subject in a way that cannot be achieved by keyword or other searches.
- It draws both synonymous terms under one heading and separates the homonymous.
- It assists the user by being made in a logical fashion, the logic being something learnt through practice.
- It disallows the random introduction of just any term as a main subject, thereby reducing the likelihood of catalogue pollution or, as we witness on Internet search engines, information overload.
- The structure presents the searcher with further choices within their own search, especially through the use of subdivisions that help both in the selection process and in the range of possibilities the catalogue makes available.

## **Choice of Subject Headings Systems**

This brings us to the choice of subject headings used in our libraries.

*Sears List of Subject Headings* is mainly used by school libraries and small public libraries. Special libraries also use it though theological libraries would be wanting many more, specialist terms than are available here. The latest edition I know of is the 14<sup>th</sup> (1991) edited by Martha T Mooney.

*Religion Indexes Thesaurus* (1994) is the latest ATLA descriptor list for indexing periodical articles. Some libraries use this resource for subject cataloguing and it has advantages. It specialises in religious terms. It is authority-controlled. It is copiously cross-referenced. It is updated. But there are disadvantages. It is restricted in its non-religious vocabulary. It is not as versatile as LC for subdivisions. It is Chicago-centric, meaning its terminology and worldview is decidedly American. In a small specialist religious library though, one not about to expand extensively, RIO Thesaurus is perfectly adequate.

*Library of Congress Subject Headings*. For most of us, I suspect, LCSH is the authority we have recourse to from day to day, whether in book form or via some computerised form. (And if anyone is still deciding which system to adopt, I would advise LC immediately.) LC, is the biggest, latest, best edited (some would say over-edited) and most authoritative set of subject headings. Authoritative because they are the headings approved by the Library of Congress in Washington which, as we know, has prime control and influence of library matters; in the English-speaking world. They appear on CIP, on databases, and are almost universally recognised headings in libraries.

There are several important LC resources you should know about.

- Library of Congress Subject Headings. 20th ed., 1997.
- Library of Congress rule interpretations.
- Subject cataloguing manual: subject headings. 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 1996
- Theology cataloguing bulletin. A quarterly newsletter of the Technical Services section of the ATLA, it contains listings of new and changed subject headings at LC.
- Free-floating subdivisions and alphabetical index. 9<sup>th</sup> ed., 1997.
- Cataloguing service bulletin.

Authority listings for names, subjects, and rules are also available on microfiche.

#### **Other Subject resources**

- Religious books 1876-1982, subject index, author index, title index- (New York: Bowker, 1983) 4 vols. (Still in print, US\$245 as of 1997).
- National Union Catalog (Books) Library of Congress. In book form and microfiche though not, so far as I know, available today.

But the greatest resources of ready-made cataloguing are now found on the Internet.

- Australian Bibliographic Network
- Library of Congress on the Web-
- Other library catalogues. At JTL, for example, I have book-marked Georgetown University Library Catalogue (called GEORGE) for Jesuit material, the John Rylands Library in Manchester, Sheffield University Library catalogue, and others. These are invaluable resources for the unabashed catalogue-borrower. Though it is best to be selective or you can find a mass of these building up.

## **Manual Description and Computer Description**

This brings us to the present bifurcation in cataloguing practice into the card group and the computer group.

For the Card Group the main concerns are checking CIPs, maintaining authoritative headings in the catalogue, working with the pre-existing catalogue and all its works, and keeping subjects filed in proper order.

For the Computer Group the main concerns are checking downloaded records for accuracy, maintaining authorities (normally when you find the time), making sure that your cross-referencing and searches operate properly, making sure the whole system doesn't start playing up.

Whatever camp you belong in though, the basic steps of subject selection remain.

### **Subject Selection**

- Discern the subject or subjects from the title page(s), blurb information, table of contents. If necessary you will have to start reading the book.
- You determine the overall subject of the book.
- You identify multiple subjects and interrelationships.
- You represent both with the subject headings at hand. You must always be sensitive to possible subdivision of the headings chosen-
- Always go for specificity. If the book is about broilgas do not start with "Birds" but go straight to "Broilgas".
- On reflection, judge if the headings selected cover all the main subjects. If not, add extra ones, but do not be overzealous in trying to include every minor subject. On average, 2 to 5 headings should be sufficient; sometimes you will need only one, sometimes you may well need 7 or 8.
- Always keep in mind the needs of your own users. There are subject headings that will be no earthly good to a user because they are outdated usage, or because there are so many represented in the catalogue they have lost all representative meaning (eg Catholic Church - Doctrines). More important still, there are subject headings not in the CIP or MARC record that for whatever reason, have been omitted and which would be necessary as well as useful to your user- You must develop a sensitivity to the possible needs of your users, thus including headings that will further assist their serendipitous way. The rule has always been, the user- is always right, even when they don't know they're looking for. It is up to us to put it before them if at all possible.

### **Ready-made Cataloguing**

On the computer catalogue we must deal with other people's ideas about what the subject of a book happens to be. Manual cataloguers have the same job when confronted with the CIP. We spend much time judging other cataloguing then making it our own. We have constantly to be on guard against poor subject analysis, misleading subject headings, and many times no subject headings at all.

I repeatedly implore you not to believe everything you read. CIP is very often invented before the book has even been sighted. It is not out of the question that you are the first cataloguer to actually study the book. Tracings quite plainly do not always represent thoroughly the book we have in front of us. Other cataloguers supply the most rudimentary headings to works, especially if they are unfamiliar with the topic as is sometimes the case with religious material.

The records we receive from ABN will sometimes display a PRIORITY level, which more often than not means no subject headings. This is an expression of the low priority LC puts on religious works, especially foreign language religious books, and why it is we need to be ever vigilant and active to improve these records, either on ABN or at home. Furthermore, in database cataloguing there is a

temptation to include one or two subject headings and be satisfied with that Whereas there are subjects still missing that. need description. All this ready-made cataloguing is useful, but it should never be treated as sacrosanct, signed, sealed and delivered. Go back and look again at the work, discerning for yourself if the record really covers everything adequately. Also, if it still needs to cover any special local needs.

LC MARC records and CIP data can be full of specific and useful headings; they can also contain general headings, that clog up the works and are of no help to users in special libraries like our own. My favourite bete noire in this regard is "Catholic Church - Doctrines". A superabundance of this heading at JTL makes it impossible to find anything. Unless they represent a book on doctrine broadly speaking I delete them. We do not need a heading like this for every doctrine under the sun.

With all these matters, an objectivity about the subjects of a book is essential. The added gift, is it an ability or a talent(?), for common sense will always ease the problem solving process and your potential stress levels.

*Philip Harvey*  
*Technical Services Librarian*  
*Joint Theological Library, Parkville, Victoria.*



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