

ASSIGNING SUBJECT HEADINGS

Philip Harvey

INTRODUCTION

Assigning subject headings is like being the first generation architect on a gothic cathedral. There is actually no perfect solution and no seeming end to the business, i.e. there is no simple answer to how it should be done. All one should do is aim for the best. For these reasons it is one of the most creative and interesting aspects of cataloguing, while at the same time often being the least satisfactory. That is to say, the most frustrating.

What we are dealing with is a Tower of Babel, full of conflicting opinions, usages, traditions and so forth, usually with little time to sort things out because of the ceaseless inflow of new terms, rules and opinions. There are times when you can enjoy being involved in the word chase, other times when it becomes such a monster to deal with, that it is better just to walk away from it for a while. Indeed, there are days when it's much better to leave a book or heading problem until the next day rather than keeping on treading a maze of guesses and leads; you will be fresher, and very often the subject of the book becomes much clearer upon renewed inspection.

Let me also suggest that it is like being on a whaling vessel. There are lots of subject headings out there, but only one white whale. It is our task to find the most appropriate heading for the work, and not to haul in a whole range of headings that do not suit.

Let me add further that subject cataloguing is like being judge on an international court of law. The interpretation you put on a particular work or a particular heading or a particular rule may be suitable for your conditions, but you should not expect the the same interpretation to be possible or even permissible for all other jurisdictions.

Finally I should say it is like being in ballet school. You know by heart the story you are to perform, you have learnt all the steps and the

orchestration - all the things at your disposal are understood. But what you need, to get it right, is feel.

SOURCES OF SUBJECTS AND SUBJECT HEADINGS

1. Two heads are better than one. Do not create headings out of your own head. Don't take chances. What you call "tinned tomatoes" one week you call "canned tomatoes" the next. What you call Burma one week they call something unheard of, the next. At least with a standard list of headings you can create a pattern that users are able to follow.

This is the answer too, if you arrive before a catalogue that has been the result of such "inventive cataloguing", or that uses different headings from normal. Do not persist with the same mistake; adopt one of the standard lists and keep to it.

2. Do not ask the author, (or anybody else,) for subject headings of their work, e.g. authors of theses. Advice and suggestions can be useful, they will give you leads, they will help to clarify the subject at times, but they are not authoritative and final. Your source of information is first and foremost the book itself.

Also, once you have followed the author's suggestions it is very hard to explain later why you chose headings other than those originally recommended. Authors have a habit of checking up on their works in catalogues.

3. The practice of main word subject entry taken from the title is inadequate, faulty, lazy and customarily repetitive. The examples of where this method fails are legion. At its simplest, the words in the title information are too often a weak guide to the actual subject of the work, and are very often a misleading and even false indication of the material.

This method is symptomatic of laziness. It relies solely on the most obvious source of information: it is no more than what politicians in Canberra like to call a quick fix. It is better not to have any subject

entries at all than have these ones. Furthermore, the information should be supplied in title entries already - you are in fact repeating access points.

I am aware of the criticism that this implies of some computer systems, and other catalogues, but I am unrepentant. Our first consideration is the user, who deserves the best possible subject access.

I would argue that main word or key word cataloguing contradicts the purpose of having subject headings in the first place - which is to make available necessary alternative access points to the title and author.

4. Rely on cataloguing-in-publication information (CIP) and associated library reference works (*Library of Congress catalog*, *Australian national bibliography*, *Religious books 1876-1982*, etc.) as a back-up. Warnings need to be voiced about the CIP, be it British, American, Australian, or any other.

Why is CIP not an entirely reliable guide for subject headings? LC's policy is to provide duplicate entries at specific and generic levels. Hence the large number (even six or more) of headings given. Of these, I would advise always to test out the specific ones and to ignore the generic ones, by and large, as a waste. A good example of conspicuous overusage is 'Catholic Church - Doctrine' and its variants, which seem to be appearing with heavy regularity. First, I would only use this heading for a book devoted entirely to that subject. Second, when the book is about a particular doctrine, e.g. the Trinity, it is that subject we are concerned to convey to the user. That this is a doctrine of the Catholic Church is secondary in these circumstances. If every book on a specific doctrine had this generic heading 'Catholic Church - Doctrine' we would have hundreds of such headings, nearly all of them of no use to the user at all.

Remember that the CIP is only one source of information, and is not the most complete and reliable - only the work itself is that. It serves a practical purpose but is not to be treated as sacrosanct, the final answer, "what the experts say, so it must be right."

It is important to remember that the CIP is intended to serve the largest number of libraries possible. Sometimes the headings will have to be edited to fit your own existing system with its special idiosyncrasies. Sometimes you will have to add headings relevant to your collection but seemingly not relevant to the inventors of the CIP.

Some of the inventors are more faithful to the text than others. It is well known that CIP is usually created before the book is published, very often without viewing the full work. Even after such a viewing has taken place you sometimes wonder if they were looking at the same book you have in front of you. It is well to be alive and alert to CIP that may display some national or historic bias, not to mention religious or denominational bias or misunderstanding. Also, always watch out for headings obviously taken straight from main words in the title and subtitle.

One must also be warned against the inexplicable word collages of the British Library. The problem is that they create precis-strings in reverse, sometimes automatically translating LCSH into the string. The result is a confusing jumble. As anything other than a lead to your final subject choices they are cloudy if not downright erroneous and pointless (meaning access pointless). British Library CIP may give a clue to subject contents where other sources do not, but beyond that I would leave them alone.

The latest news is that the British Library is actually cutting down on the amount of subject cataloguing, and there is a strong possibility of CIP no longer appearing in British books. They are also loosening links with the Americans.

At the same time, Library of Congress has been reducing its cataloguing staff due to costs and there is strong rumour of untrained people being employed. This is going to mean less CIP and a lowering of the standard we are used to. An appreciable decrease in the actual appearance of CIP in books has been noticed in the last year.

Generally, this is going to mean having to do more original cataloguing in all libraries, including, it could be predicted, a new demand for skilled subject cataloguing at home in our own libraries.

5. Go to a standard subject headings source and use it. The first of these is Sears. The main disadvantages of this source are:

- Bibliographic resources use LC, not Sears, e.g. MARC services, CIP, subject guides to books in print.
- It does not have the same number, breadth or depth of headings. Research has found (Schadlich, p.361-3) that conversion from Sears to LC would involve the changing of 10-14% of existing Sears headings.¹

The second of these is Catholic subject headings.

- Obviously, it is devised for Catholic librarians primarily and this means priority to Catholicism and largely the exclusion of anything else.
- Very much an in-house source.

The third is the Religion index one : thesaurus.

- It is devised for an index and not a catalogue, i.e. many of the headings would make no sense in a catalogue (e.g. Bibliography). The user wouldn't go there.
- There are not enough subdivisions, and those supplied do not come with scope notes or any kind of directions.

First I say, use a source. Then, when you have a source chosen, stick to it. Any source is better than no source, but if you are looking for the best then use LCSH, for the following reasons:

- It is recognized universally in the English-speaking world.
- It is being constantly updated.
- It is the most comprehensive and most detailed of all available lists.
- It is the basis for most bibliographic reference works, CIP, online cataloguing records, etc.

¹ Schadlich, Thomas 'Changing from Sears to LC subject Headings' *Library resources and technical services* 24 (4) 1980, pp.361-363.

RULES

What follows is a decalogue to keep in mind when assigning subject headings.

1. Always consider the user first. The reader is the first focus of our attention. After all, it is not primarily for the librarians that this catalogue is being created, but as a quicker means of finding things in the collection. The general identity of the reader should be known in the special libraries we are working in. This user should never be underestimated : if anything the cataloguer should overestimate the potential user's intelligence and wants.

Connected to this respect for the user is the actual presentation of headings. " ... clarity of presentation and layout of entries is far more important to users than the fullness of data, or the implementation of our own librarian defined standards. Users wish cataloguers to avoid over-abbreviation of words, ambiguous use of punctuation, and use of jargon terms." (Bryant, p.13).²

Even the typeface is important. It must not be too small, blurry or illegible. Also, the line spacing should not be too close together. We know from experience that good clear type and spacing helps make things easier to see, assisting immeasurably our reception of the material.

Philip Bryant wants us to remember that posterity will not want the details you give but will want information you have not provided. (Bryant, p.16)³ I don't altogether agree with this anyway, but what it points up is that it is very certainly the present-day users we are working for, not people of twenty or fifty years hence, whose language habits and research needs are entirely unpredictable.

² Bryant, Philip. "We are cataloguing for posterity". Are we? *Cataloguing Australia*. 15(1) 1989, p.13.

³ *Ibid.* p.16.

Also connected to this, but by way of warning, do not heed the whims of every user of the Library. There is nothing worse than the busybody who comes up to tell you what the book is really about and that it should have an access point under such and such a heading. Listen to them politely, but only ever act on it if they are comprehensively correct.

2. Select the subject that the book is about, not what subject area it belongs in. Users need to be given the best access. We must give them the specific (and technical) terms first rather than the general (and popular) ones. I.e. enter a work by its subject and not by the class that includes that subject.

3. Select the subject(s) that best cover the majority of material in the contents of the work. As a rough rule, if a topic is dealt with in more than 50% of the work then it should be given a subject heading.

4. If in doubt, if no subject heading can be found to describe a work, or if the material is so diverse that any subject heading could not possibly help indicate the contents, do not give any heading whatsoever. It is better to give no heading than to give ones that are false, misleading or inadequate. In particular, if the work is fiction, poetry, drama, liturgy or essays on no single subject, no subject heading is usually assigned. One can find exceptions to all this of course, e.g. historical fiction, religious verse, - but this is a good rule to follow.

5. Always look at the complete contents. Never believe just what is said on the cover, in the title or even in the CIP. If need be you may even have to do the unthinkable and start reading the work in an attempt to ascertain its subject. More than once I have had to work my way systematically through an item before rightly securing its theme. There is even a philosophy held by some that you are not truly a cataloguer until you are prepared to spend an entire day trying to catalogue just one book.

6. Resist the temptation to create as many headings as possible. Many works only require one or two headings and it is pointless making extra ones just because you think that is necessary or expected. One source orders the cataloguer to keep it always to a minimum of three -

and though that can be severe, three is a good guide to go by. If you need more than three then you need good (and probably obvious) reasons for the additions.

If you find the best headings then you shouldn't need any others. This is connected to the question of whether to create both specific and general headings for one work. If you want to make general headings that is your choice. However I feel that such actions lead to unnecessary pollution and duplication, whether the catalogue be a separate subject catalogue or a dictionary catalogue. I have always been taught to avoid general headings. Economizing should make access as swift and painless as possible.

7. For the sake of consistency and ease, keep to the practices set out in the standard list you use, e.g. LCSH. Avoid the temptation to make elaborate new inventions and to mix and match other lists and systems.

8. What do you do when LC changes the subject headings to suit changing usage or to replace outmoded expressions? Well, first I would say, keep your copy and annotate it for as long as possible, especially if the budget doesn't stretch to buying a new edition. Then second, I would use the term that the user will be most familiar with, not the passing, obsolete and unnecessary term. Most people will go to 'Pastoral counselling' but not be seeking 'Cure of souls'.

There are three solutions to the question of obsolete headings. (a) Change them by deleting the old headings and typing new ones. This is really only feasible if the number of cards for a heading is small. Even after that, a See ref. will need to be made from the old heading. (b) Interfile old and new headings that file next to one another. (c) File separately, adopting whichever heading you prefer and keeping to it. Create See refs. back and forth.

9. Always observe and try to respect the author's intentions, what it is the author intends it to be about.

There are certain difficulties (not the least of them, philosophical) in fulfilling this commandment. The first difficulty is objectivity.

"Until recently it was almost an article of faith in librarianship that subject analysis was objective; that is, the subject cataloguer, on the basis of literary warrant and usage, devised subject terms and classification notations to fit the works being catalogued. He refrained from making judgments; e.g., the heading "Superstitions" was reserved for works stated by their authors to be about superstitions. Books about palmistry, divination, or other such arts were to be analyzed as legitimate subjects of study in their own right, because the cataloguer was not the one to decide which practices were superstitious and which not. [...]"

"The terms in use, at the time they were established, did, by and large, reflect both literary warrant and the usage at least of the authors of the works being analyzed. The issue thus seemed a first to be primarily one of currency; all sorts of terms, not just those relating to people, had not been updated when usage changed. Later, other issues arose when it was suggested that the subject catalog, as an educational tool, should use the "correct" term, the one used by group members to apply to themselves, whether or not the term was popular with the users of the catalog. This need was particularly emphasized when the catalogue term had invidious connotations, whether or not catalogue users were aware of them."⁴

The second difficulty is one of opinion or persuasion. For example, how, do you ascribe headings to a violently anti-semitic tract, given that you would object to the contents of the work and the attitude of the author? The work is about the Jews. It must be given the appropriate heading, whatever one's personal feelings may be, because that is where a user is likely to go for such material. By the same rule, a heading for antisemitism is inappropriate because that is not what the work is actually about. A subheading like 'Controversial literature' may be used; however the problem there is that what is controversy to one person might be a matter of orthodoxy or even indifference to someone else. But if really in doubt still, leave it.

⁴ Harris, Jessica L. Milstead, and Doris H. Clack. "Treatment of People and peoples in subject analysis." *Library resources and technical services*. 23 (4) 1979, p.374-375..

William Weaver, the celebrated Italian language translator, once spoke of his work on Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose*. "You ask me do I know what it's all about? I don't even know what the title means." The third difficulty with judging the author's intentions comes when the author (or translator) doesn't know what it's about themselves. Sometimes, and especially with works of creativity and imagination, the avowed intention and the final result can be two very different things. The cataloguer may be able to see things the author could not. One should be warned about becoming too critical of works under scrutiny however. The Weaver confession can also give us heart, for if those responsible for the work don't know what it's about, then we are also in a position to acknowledge difficulties.

Whatever, try to maintain objectivity, keeping in mind that the headings available to us and our choice of them will always involve some subjectivity.

10. As a general covering rule to all of these rules, let me quote Philip Bryant and say that the three most important ingredients of 'quality' are 'accuracy', 'consistency' and 'timeliness'.⁵ Quality cataloguing generally is what he means, but it stands well for subject headings as for the rest. Some people may argue with timeliness, saying a complete, good entry can take time and mustn't be hurried - however I think the time element should be kept in mind, and not be used as an excuse for becoming slow and indifferent to the task.

Philip Harvey is Technical Services Librarian at the Joint Theological Library, Parkville, Victoria.

⁵ Bryant. Op.cit. p.13.