

Obituary.

Jean Aitchison

(1925–2020)



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On 26 November 2020 the information/knowledge professions lost a pioneer whose work has been an inspiration to successive generations of our colleagues, and still influences knowledge organization techniques today. Jean Aitchison was probably best known for her innovative 1969 publication *Thesaurofacet*, combining a faceted classification with a thesaurus, and for the classic text *Thesaurus construction: a practical manual* which she co-authored through four editions starting in 1972. Those two works provided, respectively, a model for best practice and a crystal clear guide to the intellectual task of building a thesaurus.

Jean Binns (her maiden name) was born in Huddersfield, in the north of England, on 10th June 1925. After the outbreak of the Second World War her secondary school was relocated to Chatsworth House in the Peak District, not a totally negative experience as this magnificent stately home with its 105-acre garden made a lasting impression on her. Jean went on to study history at UCL (University College London). Again her studies were disrupted by the war, as the College was evacuated to Wales. By the time Jean graduated, with Honours, the war was over. But before long she chose to return to UCL to study librarianship, and emerged with a Diploma in 1948.

Jean's outstanding organisational skills must have been apparent from the start, for her career advanced rapidly through a succession of public sector libraries, and within a few years she was appointed to set up a new Commercial and Technical library at Kingston-upon-Hull. Her next career

step was to join the English Electric company to start up a technical library for their R&D site involved in design and development of gas turbines and nuclear reactors. During her time with English Electric Jean became a Fellow of the United Kingdom Library Association, and also joined the influential Classification Research Group (CRG), the think-tank that has done so much to explore and extend the principles of faceted classification first conceived by S. R. Ranganathan. In May 1957 Jean attended the famous Dorking Conference, which brought together so many legendary figures of classification and of information retrieval, including Ranganathan himself, Eugene Garfield, Eric de Grolier, Brian Vickery, Cyril Cleverdon, and many more. During that Conference a 1955 memorandum from the CRG entitled "The need for a faceted classification as the basis for all information retrieval" was greeted with enthusiasm. Jean Binns maintained a lifelong commitment to the cause of facet analysis.

While at English Electric Jean first met her husband-to-be, Tom Aitchison. They married in 1961, and over the next three years their two children James and Margaret were born. In those days childcare was hard to arrange and most young mothers had to give up their careers. But Jean somehow managed to keep her professional activities going, mostly from home. She offered consultancy services around the evaluation of library and information services, and among other projects worked on the ground-breaking Cranfield tests of various information retrieval devices. In

1967 English Electric commissioned her to review their indexing needs and aging classification scheme, which led in 1969 to the publication of *Thesaurofacet*.

The indexing language conveyed by *Thesaurofacet* covered a wide subject area and comprised around 23,000 terms, of which 16,000 were preferred terms. One important source for it was the 1967 edition of the influential American *Thesaurus of Engineering and Scientific Terms* (*TEST*), providing not just plenty of terms and concepts, but a de facto standard setting out conventions that are still in use today. *TEST*'s conventional tags BT, NT and RT were already widely accepted, and duly appeared in *Thesaurofacet* too. But in other respects Jean was not afraid to break with convention. Consider, for example, the overall presentation of *TEST*, with its main alphabetically organised section supported by three indexes: one hierarchical, one permuted, and a third by subject category. In *Thesaurofacet* by contrast, the faceted classification section had pride of place, with the alphabetical thesaurus seen as complementary to it. This reflected Jean's systematic and original approach to thesaurus construction: first build your faceted classification; then derive your thesaurus from it. Her method based on facet analysis, and the style of thesaurus it delivered, was later to be refined and enhanced in her many thesauri published subsequently.

Hard on the heels of *Thesaurofacet* came Jean's collaboration with Alan Gilchrist to produce the first edition of *Thesaurus construction: a practical manual*. Preceding the emergence of any of the national or international standards, such practical guidance was sorely needed. Admirably concise at just 95 pages, this DIY guide explained exactly how to build a thesaurus from scratch. It began, "Before work can begin on the construction of a thesaurus, a study should be made of the information retrieval system it is intended to serve." This emphasis on purpose-driven design was fundamental to Jean's successes with consultancy as well as teaching. Everything she did was designed to work well.

More classifications and thesauri were to follow, such as the 1977 edition of the *UNESCO Thesaurus*. Soon afterwards the British Standards Institution (BSI) sought Jean's advice for its Technical Help to Exporters (THE) information service, by which time she was leading the way towards automation of the clerical aspects of thesaurus construction. Under her guidance the faceted schedules of the *BSI ROOT Thesaurus* were keyed into a minicomputer (for the era of the personal computer had not yet arrived) and the alphabetically organised section was generated entirely automatically, for publication of the first edition of *ROOT* in 1981. Her design for the balance between classified and alphabetical sections had moved on too. Whereas in *Thesaurofacet* indexers had to consult both sections to see the whole range of broader, narrower and related terms applicable to a given concept, for *ROOT* the layout of the classified

section was enhanced to incorporate the full context of hierarchical and associative relationships for every concept, thus reducing the alphabetical section to the status of an index. Another of her innovations was to replace the tags BT, NT and RT with the symbols <, > and – respectively. The rationale for this was to fit the tool for multilingual use, by adopting linguistically neutral conventions. At the same time, however, it provided an escape from the long-term confusion caused by BT, for example, seeming to stand for Broader Term although its real meaning is Broader Concept. Unfortunately there has been little take-up of this innovation in other well-known thesauri.

Jean's subsequent thesauri included the *Thesaurus on Youth* (1981) for the UK National Youth Bureau, the *DHSS Thesaurus* (1985) for the Department of Health and Social Security, the *Employment and Training Thesaurus* for the Department of Employment, the second edition of UNHCR's *International Thesaurus of Refugee Terminology* (1986), the *Royal Institute for International Affairs Thesaurus* (1992) and finally her last thesaurus, the *DIAL UK Classification and Thesaurus* (1996). DIAL UK was a charity for the disabled. Alongside her work on the above publications, Jean delivered advice to the developers of many more knowledge organization systems, and from 1975 to 1990 ran the training course on thesaurus construction offered regularly by Aslib. For many years she was very active on BSI committee IDT/2/2, the committee responsible for standards on thesauri, classification, indexing, and other information description processes.

Jean first got to know ISKO's founder Ingetraut Dahlberg in the early eighties, when they worked together to provide advice on facet analysis in a project supported by UNESCO. With many shared interests they developed a firm and lasting friendship. As well as contributing to ISKO, Jean was a long-term active supporter of the CRG and the Bliss Classification Association.

In recognition of so many achievements, in 1982 Jean received the Ranganathan Award presented every two years by the Committee on Classification Research of the International Federation for Documentation, and in 1991 she was made a Fellow of the UK Institute of Information Scientists.

With such a busy professional life while bringing up a young family, most mothers would have been hard pressed to do more, but Jean was equally committed to multiple voluntary and charitable activities. Through the Methodist Church she began weekly visits to patients in the local psychiatric hospital. For twenty-four years she chaired the church's Neighbourhood Committee. On a weekly basis she helped with transport and the serving of lunches for elderly and disabled people. One particular beneficiary was a profoundly deaf elderly lady, whom Jean and her husband visited regularly, took for trips out, and helped with shopping. In 1991 Jean started weekly drop-in sessions at the

church for people with mental health problems, and in 1996 became Secretary of the local branch of mental health charity Mind. As late as 2015, when Jean had reached the age of 90, she was still running the drop-in sessions.

Undoubtedly Jean's productive life and career owed much to her happy marriage, a partnership in every sense, since Tom too rose to eminence in the information profession and shared her involvement, for example, in the information retrieval evaluation work at Cranfield. They celebrated 56 years together before his death in 2018. In the last two years of her life, suffering from arthritis and a faulty hip, Jean moved into a comfortable care home until she died peacefully at the age of 95. Jean Aitchison has left our profession a great legacy. Thanks to her dedicated efforts, the thesaurus construction manual was a bestseller running into four editions over three decades and is still much cited in the current literature. Among those who knew her personally, she will be remembered even more fondly for her many acts of thoughtful kindness. In addition to her two children James and Margaret, she is survived by five grandchildren.

Stella Dextre Clarke

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