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## Book Reviews

AUSTIN, Derek: *PRECIS: A Manual of Concept Analysis and Subject Indexing*. 2nd ed. with assistance from Mary Dykstra. London, GB: The British Library 1984. XI, 397 p.<sup>1</sup>

PRECIS (PREserved Context Index System), the verbal subject analysis system with the aid of a computer, consists, in principle, of two work processes which are related to one another:

- the first deals with the ordering of concepts, which characterise a document, in input strings and their computer processing as entries in a subject index or subject catalogue, which is the syntactic side of the system;
- the second has to do with relations between concepts which are structured in a thesaurus within the system and with vocabulary control, which is the semantic side of the system<sup>2</sup>;

The beginning of the first chapter of the book under review characterises this system in a condensed form both precisely and lucidly. As a contrasting illustration, this is then followed by examples from the field of verbal subject analysis which show what PRECIS is *not!* - an introduction which, from a content and didactic point of view, is highly successful. It is noteworthy that Austin begins the second chapter with a description - though only short - of document analysis as the basis of all relevant literature analysis, as this is often neglected or not dealt with at all in standard text-books or sets of rules. The whole procedure of the formulation and notation of a so-called PRECIS string is, for didactic reasons, presented in single steps, a presentation from which the theoretic exploration of the basic method behind PRECIS at the same time also benefits. In practice, of course, and Austin rightly points this out, an experienced indexer can carry out the formulation of a PRECIS-string in the course of the document analysis so that, as a rule, indexing is less complicated than it may appear in this step by step presentation. The search process is facilitated by the structure of the PRECIS entry format; in principle, it consists of a series of steps, each of which contains a relatively simple decision (relevant or non-relevant).

What is not quite understandable is the fact that in chapter three Austin already deals with the "conventional marks", "substitute phrases", "connective codes" and "theme interlinks", but only turns to the role operators, which are highly important in working out PRECIS strings, at a much later date. Chapter four takes a critical look at the indexing of compound terms. It is notable with what astuteness this problem, which is difficult for any subject analysis method, is tackled and, with regard to search requirements, optimally solved for the English language<sup>3</sup>, though the time expenditure necessary for the indexing is not small and a certain amount of subjective scope remains. In this chapter time restriction is also considered, a comparatively uncomplicated procedure for PRECIS.

In chapters five to thirteen we have a detailed presentation of the operators, which form the backbone of the PRECIS syntax, with instructions for their application. The question of space restriction obviously poses no great problem for PRECIS, as it does for traditional subject catalogues, and is given a comparatively short treatment in chapter nine. To my mind, the distinction made between geographical terms as "locality", and as "key system" with different codings is questionable in view of the fact that they have no changing influence on the entry format. The treatment, proper to the system, of those terms/concepts which characterise the statement itself, the essential core of a document, naturally forms the main focus of the presentation. Consequently, peripheral factors are investigated, e.g. the standpoint of the author, a selected study example/field of study, the inner/outer form of a document, the reader target-group. Finally, one chapter is devoted to the transfer of a PRECIS string written by the indexer according to standard acceptancy to an adequate manipulation string which can be read by a machine. This is the syntactic side of the system covering a total of 190 pages from chapters two to fourteen.

The following chapters (15-19, 78 pages) are devoted to the semantic side of PRECIS and describe the thesaurus construction. The PRECIS thesaurus as an instrument for vocabulary control and the representation of basic concepts does not, in general, differ from other information search thesauri and bases, as is expressly emphasised, on principles as laid down in norms for the elaboration of monolingual thesauri (e.g. in Standard ISO 2788 on which Austin himself also worked). Accordingly, chapter fifteen deals with general questions on thesaurus construction, which, although known to the experts, make useful reading for practical work. Chapters 16 to 18 then go into the specific forms and procedures of the thesaurus used for PRECIS. First of all, all the work processes needed by the indexer are described, followed by instructions for the notation of the code which serves as the immediate base for the computer entry and with comments on their way of operating.

The last chapter is of great importance for practical work with PRECIS. It describes, with the aid of a flow chart, the course of the process using the British Library as an example and which could serve as a model for effective work organisation in any large library; furthermore, it gives a short account of various versions of the printout of PRECIS entries (one- or two-level index, paper or COM printout, Online operation) and, in addition, points out the possibilities of application in non-English languages as well as giving further literature. The book concludes with some comments on PRECIS software (which is commercially unobtainable); there then follows - which is very important for practical work - on 46 pages in Appendix 5 a detailed description of the algorithms which present the basis of the programme technical aspect of PRECIS and which may serve as a base for the programming of a computer. In the Appendices 1-4, are given a table of the operators and codes used in PRECIS, additions to some chapters, as well as the answers to exercise questions in the text. A subject index facilitates its use as a reference book.

This second edition of the PRECIS manual<sup>4</sup> gives a complete, didactically well-constructed description<sup>5</sup> of

the system, taking into consideration the further developments and improvements made since the first edition in 1974. There can be no doubt that Austin's "Manual" will be the standard work for the use of PRECIS in the English language for a long time to come. For other languages, special studies exist in which the respectively necessary additions or modifications of the codings are described. As, however, not only the principles of working out a thesaurus, but also the basic linguistic structures of the PRECIS syntax have general validity, the reading of this manual should have priority wherever the application of PRECIS is intended. Reading it does, however, make great demands on the reader and presupposes knowledge of the theory of indexing, in particular of verbal subject analysis. As a preliminary introduction to PRECIS, such texts should, therefore, be recommended which, leaving out the details, restrict themselves to the presentation of the main features and essential peculiarities of the system and which have been published in German<sup>6</sup>.

Helmut Beck

#### Notes:

- 1 We are very grateful to the Editor-in-Chief for permission to translate and publish this review which appeared in German in *Zbl.Bibl.wes.* 101 (1987)No.7, p.324-326
- 2 In an earlier publication, I gave a detailed account of the workings of PRECIS, for which reason I can refrain from further explanations in the frame of this book review. (Beck, H.: PRECIS - A method of computer-aided verbal subject analysis on a linguistic basis. *Zbl.Bibl.wes.* 100(1986)Nos.6 and 8, pp.264-267; 333-339)
- 3 In this second edition, we are given an amended edition of the first edition of the "Manual" - which leads to the conclusion that coping with this problem also caused PRECIS particular difficulties.
- 4 It was originally intended as a textbook for students, but this conception could not be reconciled with the aims of a comprehensive manual. In the meanwhile, a special primer for teaching purposes has appeared in English: Dykstra, M.: PRECIS: A primer. London: The British Library 1985; also a workbook: Ramsden, M.J.: PRECIS: a workbook for students of librarianship. London: Bingley 1981. (Outlines of Modern Librarianship)
- 5 Reading is facilitated by the fact that the comments appear as genuine footnotes on the respective pages, a typographic practice agreeable to the reader, but which, unfortunately, would seem to have gone out of fashion.
- 6 Cf. comments to bibliographic references in the paper quoted under footnote 1, on p.339.

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DYKSTRA, Mary: *PRECIS: A Primer*. London: The British Library Bibliographic Services Division 1985. VIII,270p., ISBN 0-7123-1022-3

Ever since the British Library adopted PRECIS for creating the subject index of the *British National Bibliography*, the development of the Preserved Context Index System has been a success story. The system has been acclaimed and accepted in numerous countries throughout the world. Derek Austin, who developed PRECIS, first published a comprehensive manual in 1974 and a revised edition in 1984. With more and more people working with PRECIS, the need for teaching material arose. Several textbooks on PRECIS were published, for instance M.J.Ramsden's *PRECIS: A workbook for students* (London 1981), or Ph.A.Richmond's *Intro-*

*duction to PRECIS for North American Usage* (Littleton 1981). The approach of the present textbook is different. Having assisted Austin in the preparation of the second edition of the manual, Mary Dykstra took the opportunity to publish what she called a *primer*, strictly based on the manual and intended to serve as an introductory course for beginners who might be put off by the sheer weight of the linguistic, computational and thesaural framework of PRECIS rules (and exceptions) amply documented in the manual itself.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* neatly defines *primer* as an "elementary schoolbook for teaching children to read" or a "small introductory book". Background, scope as well as intended audience of the primer are plainly and carefully stated. Ms.Dykstra, Associate Professor at the School of Library Service, Dalhousie University (Canada), herself suggests that the manual and the primer may be used in a complementary way (the manual for teachers and the primer for the students). Although resembling the manual in many ways (arrangement and presentation of contents, layout), the present book may not necessarily be considered a kind of off-shoot of the manual. Yet crucial questions remain. Is the primer a shortened and simplified version of the manual, limited to the most important features usually applied in the indexing process? Does it merely give an idea of what PRECIS is all about, or will the student, having completed the primer, be able to work with the system? Is there any didactic approach in the primer, more didactic than the manual can understandably be? Such an approach will certainly be expected, particularly since the author has been teaching PRECIS for 10 years.

The primer divides into 16 chapters, which follow the path set out by the manual. The introductory chapters 1-6 follow the manual quite closely, both in content and in length. Incidentally, Prof.Dykstra, very much like Dr.Austin, finds it easier to say what PRECIS is *not*, rather than what it actually *is*. The primer then goes on to describe string writing codes and conventions, differencing, dependent elements and coordinate concepts. However, it is more concise (and straightforward in didactic terms) when it comes to the description of primary operators (location; key system: object of transitive action, or performer of intransitive action; action; agent: performer of transitive action; viewpoint-as-form; selected instance; form of document). As expected from a textbook, it plainly states the PRECIS rules, describes the application of the important features, including, of course, secondary operator and the various codes, and provides numerous and telling examples. It is, perhaps, less explanatory and argumentative than the manual, to which the inquisitive student will frequently have to turn for more background information.

More regrettably, the primer provides only a heavily abbreviated version of the manual's account on thesaurus construction. Where the manual takes about 80 pages to deal extensively with several aspects of thesaurus construction (basic relationships, components of input records, building the "Penguin" network, extra codes and procedures), the primer displays only the basic relationships in more detail and sums up the remaining three chapters in 15 pages, thus reducing the content to about a third. The very lucid analysis of thesaurus