
Book Reviews

MIKSA, Francis: **The Subject in the Dictionary Catalog from Cutter to the Present**. Chicago, IL: Amer. Libr. Assoc. 1983. XIV, 482 p. ISBN 0-8389-0367-3

What is the point of subject cataloguing? Many (especially American and Canadian) librarians see the activity as wholly distinct from classification – why is this, and how could it have come to be the case? In terms of *purpose*, alphabetical subject cataloguing seems far closer to systematic classification than it does to descriptive cataloguing, but its *appearance* is so close to the latter as to make that link seem the obviously crucial one. Another basis for putting descriptive and (alphabetical) subject cataloguing on one side and (systematic) classification on the other is that the latter is so much less intelligible to so many librarians. Many of these persons, whether as cataloguers, reference persons, or onlookers – with power such as administrators, find the alphabetical subject catalogue at least faintly embarrassing, and hope that the online catalogue will make it increasingly unnecessary except as a sort of archaeological deposit of data that can be subjected to computerized searches based on Boolean logic.

In this view the discrete terms that make up the strings-of terms that are called subject headings are more important than these strings themselves: they function as ‘enrichments’ of the admittedly insufficient title terms, thus making possible many of the interesting tricks upon which the online catalogue’s reputation for usefulness is based. But this view implies that the artifices of the strings-of-terms are themselves of as little real use as are the artifices of systematic classification.

Many of the same persons, especially as cataloguers, hoped a few years ago that the main exemplification of alphabetical subject cataloguing during most of their lives, LCSH, would be replaced by a more nearly systematic exemplification of the idea of alphabetical subject cataloguing, namely PRECIS. This hope seems at least faintly contradictory to me, since the artifices of string-construction in PRECIS are at least as obscure as those of LCSH – at least to almost all library clients and even to a large majority of librarians.

How does subject cataloguing (alphabetical or systematic) take place? Through matching books against lists of available headings? Through reading the books (word-for-word, or only ‘professionally’) and making up one’s own mind? In the first case, though, *what* does the cataloguer match against the list? What does he/she see in the book that is matchable? And if there is no list to match to, how is the compressed ‘aboutness’ of the book expressed? In its own terms? By some sort of vocabulary-control algorithm (but without recourse to an actual list)?

Most authors who write about subject cataloguing tend to reinforce the perception of non-cataloguer readers that the whole matter is either mysterious/incom-

prehensible or obvious/not-worth-any-deep-concern; this reinforcement takes place by virtue of the authors’ getting too quickly past questions such as I have just asked. Any reader who thinks otherwise is pretty much left on his/her own. Miksa is *not* such an author: he dares to grapple with the substance of the central questions without slipping off either into the bog of ‘the cataloguer’s mystique’ or (on the other side) off the cliff into the bottomlessness of ‘who cares?’.

The book can be most accurately and compendiously described as an intellectual history of the purposes of and techniques associated with the alphabetical subject catalogue from Cutter to about 1980. An *intellectual history*: therefore not a theoretical analysis. But an *intellectual* history: therefore a history that aims to establish and explain motivations, changes in attitudes both conscious and unconscious, a history not merely of what went on in libraries but of what in the society at large brought such motivations and attitudes to bear on the problems (themselves constantly changing) that society was able to recognize and allocate resources to the solution of.

Cutter is the great weight here, even though only the first half of the book is explicitly devoted to him; the second half is as much devoted to him as the first, but *negatively* rather than positively, focussing on misunderstanding and deviation. My experience with Cutter in educational and practical contexts may not be typical, but I shall act as if that is not true, and shall assume that for others as well as for me, reading of secondary treatments of him and his accomplishments, has always vaguely puzzled us. This has driven me back to his text, but there the all-too-apparent clarity of presentation seems to allay the puzzlement – but only temporarily. And so I (we?) have come to see him the great founder, but as a founder who, just because he was *first* (or nearly so) must be politely granted the right to be *primitive* and thus no longer really satisfactory in our so-much-more-sophisticated day.

My feeling of the typicality of my experience with Cutter is (though only impressionistically) validated by what I see around me: writers who appeal to this or that point in the received idea of Cutter’s ‘doctrine’, but who seldom reconcile that point with others, or with anyone else’s conflicting interpretation. What is needed, and what Miksa gives, is a *close reading* of Cutter’s text(s), but one that is embedded in a grasp of the whole *horizon* of ideas (and motivations, and attitudes) that animated Cutter and his contemporaries, and later his successors (cf. esp. p. 124f).

The Cutter-part of the book occupies the first six chapters (to p. 157), with subsequent developments occupying the next six (p. 158–393); the 13th chapter summarizes. Notes occupy p. 411–466; bibliography p. 467–474. The index (including a careful listing of Cutter’s rules by number) occupies p. 475–582; the listing of the rules could advantageously have been presented in a less physically compact manner: its 12 lines of text give listings for 18 separate rules or spans-of-rules, and would have been easier to consult if each rule had been allowed an indented line or sub-paragraph – only an extra six or so lines.

To clear up modern (and sometimes non-so-modern) misinterpretations of Cutter is a central goal of this book; to substitute a more modulated conceptual space, hospitable to development and to competition among a variety of ideas, motivations, and attitudes; to rise above (or to get down to the foundational details of) the 'received wisdom':

Recognition of the character of the transformation they [Cutter's ideas] underwent is fundamental to an understanding of how Cutter has been interpreted in the twentieth century. (p. 159)

'Close reading' of Cutter's almost-contemporary as well as later interpreters is also required for this goal to be achieved.

The answer to the initial question, 'What is the point of subject cataloguing?' therefore can be explicated into something such as 'Given that we think that the point of subject cataloguing is largely the same as it was for its historic founder, but that we are not quite sure of that point or of its historical relationship to its founding propositions, we must first of all understand "what is the point of subject cataloguing?" to the author of those propositions'. More briefly: 'If you want to know what X is all about, find out what author-of-X meant when he said X'.

Was Cutter an alphabetical-subject-heading sort of guy, to the exclusion of an interest in descriptive cataloguing and in (systematic) classification? Was he solely interested in or appealed to by alphabetic-direct subject cataloguing, to the exclusion of an interest in other possible forms of alphabetical subject-cataloguing work? The incautious might answer 'Yes' to both, but might then remember that one of the most fundamental predecessors of LC classification was the EC, the *Expansive Classification*, the work of none other than Cutter; and then again remember Cutter's background in other forms of alphabetical subject-cataloguing work – all so well documented in Miksa's edition of a collection of Cutter's works (not confined, in other words, to the famous *Rules*) under the title *Charles Ammi Cutter, Library Systematizer*¹.

Cutter's attitude was, despite his image as 'Mr. Specific Entry', basically and pervasively classificatory, hierarchical, and systematic. His concern for the conceptual distinction between 'hierarchical levels of meaning' (p. 125), as well as for their implementation in catalogue-headings, reminds of nothing so much as Ranganathan's three levels of analysis of subjects. (Particularly relevant and useful is the tabulation of Cutter's levels on p. 33f, which shows Cutter's 'significance order' functioning as a sort of proto-faceting in the sequence Individual/Concrete-general/Abstract-general.) Another resemblance to Ranganathan can be seen in the fate of the *Rules*: though 'widely consulted by librarians and usually noted with appreciation, . . . they appear never to have been adopted completely by any large number of libraries . . .' What could be more analogous to the fate of the *Colon Classification*? Our current image of Cutter would also make him an ally of such as Sanford Berman² in insistence upon choice of popular terminology, whereas in fact his preference is for a systematic plan for the formation of headings (especially multiple-word headings), relying upon

'natural' phraseology only in those instances when to do otherwise would give an impression of unnaturalness (p. 21). Only to one who saw knowledge manifested in documents as forming an organic whole³ would the embedding of syndetic references seem useful; and only to such a one as saw a hierarchy implicit in several conceptually related headings would it occur that bibliothecal economy could be achieved without sacrifice of user-satisfaction by substituting a general heading for a multiplicity of special headings subordinate to it (p. 144f).

As is amply demonstrated in *Charles Ammi Cutter, Library Systematizer* as well as in the early chapters of the present work, Cutter came to the conclusion of the superiority of alphabetic-direct subject cataloguing only after considerable experience with other forms of alphabetical subject cataloguing and with classification in the subject catalogue (and with use of their products). But the very fact that this preference had as its background the use of *classified* systems of headings (whether systematic or alphabetical), and the fact of Cutter's continuing attention to the syndetic reference-structure that could take the place of the juxtaposition that animated systematic classified systems, show him as infinitely distant from a theory that atomizes the universe of knowledge into a cloud of discrete headings without their being explicitly conceptually related to one another. In fact, alphabetic-direct subject cataloguing is 'only a permuted form of what was at its root a classificatory approach to knowledge' (p. 157).

In the matter of syndetic references, though, we find no discussion in Miksa of the question of analytic v. synthetic relations between concepts as a justification of the restriction of *see-also* references to the subordinating form. Indeed, Cutter was not theoretically opposed to superordinating references because of the possibilities that some would prove to be 'blind', but rather because they would, if carried out thoroughly, be too numerous (p. 20). Again, the danger of 'blind' references (however annoying to use for a reference librarian) is ignored in favor of the chance that 'often the best things on special subjects are found in more general works' (p. 151, quoting Cutter).

Questions of historical priority and succession in the Cutter period itself, though, are not always thoroughly dealt with by Miksa, nor are prefigurations of useful recent developments always dealt with in the illuminating way our author's general perspicacity leads us to expect: Did the technique of one-level-at-a-time subordinating references through an implicit hierarchy arise first with Cutter (cf. p. 122 and p. 336)? If Cutter was 'standing the alphabetic-classed catalog on its head' (p. 121), why did he not do the obvious: chain-indexing, which, by starting the string-of terms at the *bottom* of the hierarchy guarantees specific (or even individual) entry (the technique is barely mentioned at p. 324)? The similarity of Cutter's construction of a heading consisting of specific entry + a subarranging term that is in fact a statement of the class to which the entry term(s) belong(s) (familiar today as the homonym-avoiding parenthetical qualifier of LCSH) strongly reminds of the technique of the relative index in Dewey – but this technique is not even mentioned, though Cutter was

surely aware of it and may indeed have been influenced by it.

Principles (and the devices to which they lead) enunciated by Cutter but no longer recognized as valid and useful include subordinating references from topic-headings to the persons who instantiate them (p. 148) – the unfortunate present-day omission of which Miksa notes (p. 431). For Cutter there are four species of headings available to the dictionary cataloguer: not only our currently accepted Author, Title, and Subject, but also (library) Form (p. 124) – something especially needed in a catalogue registering a collection classified by a system which totally ignores ‘form’ as a dimension of works (except when it becomes a *topic* for secondary works): LC.

A question preliminary to ‘What is the point of subject cataloguing?’ is obviously ‘What is a subject?’, and it is something explicitly taken up by Cutter, and much criticized today especially by Coates⁴, who uses the phrase ‘stock subject’ to translate Cutter’s ‘subject’, as if to imply that a ‘stock subject’ is something fairly crude compared to the needs of our current sophistication (p. 54f.). But Miksa devotes a masterly note (n. 27, p. 421f.) to a debunking analysis of this supposed (and falsely pejorative) distinction. And the most central effort of the chapters (*cap.* 7–12) following those directly dealing with Cutter is ‘What is a subject?’ for Hanson, the A.L.A. *List of Subject Headings* . . ., Bishop and Hitchler, Sears, Mann, Pettee, Knapp, Prevost, Gull, and Haykin. (Here historicity and the subtleties of influence come to the fore; is Miksa, even if in the end justified, more ready to see his hero’s successors as imitators-and-misunderstanders than to find traces of influence and imitation in Cutter himself?) We are presented with a spectrum of change that is hardly ever aware of itself *as* change in that the constant watchword sound something like ‘Cutter showed us the way, and we remain essentially faithful to his attitudes, while of course not slavishly adhering to every detail of his often outmoded devices’. The fact is more like the chthonic conceptual change involved in the shift from οὐσία to *substantia*, from *essentia* to *Wesen*.

That we look back on the efforts of a century ago with a certain partonizing condescension – those ‘people didn’t even have the card catalogue, which we are already so eager to dump in favor of COM or the online catalogue – cannot but lead to a lack of appreciation for the sensitivity Cutter showed for the conditions of cataloguing work and of reference consultation of catalogues in his day. Miksa shows certain principles that are disastrous when applied (as they were all too often by Cutter’s successors) to the card catalogue, but which make absolutely logical good sense, as well as leading to ease of consultation, when embedded in the successively ‘totally revised book-form catalogues of Cutter’s own day: namely the provision of subarrangement under a heading only when the quantity of entries there was sufficient to cause inconvenience (p. 154).

The question of subarrangement is even more important than that, though: it leads on into the question of *specific* entry in its authentic (Cutterian) form as

against the use of types of heading-formation that can be argued to be no longer specific but *classed*. We see example after example of Cutter’s successors arguing that they were being faithful to the originating principle, while many subsequent critics deny them that faithfulness. And the only hope of keeping the whole matter straight, given that our current desideratum of ‘scope-matching’ in the assignment of subject headings finds no resonance in Cutter’s own texts, is to get a firm grasp on *his* terminology – which Miksa provides for us, focussing on the key terms ‘entry’, ‘subentry’, ‘reference’, and ‘heading’, with their modifications ‘classed’, ‘specific’, ‘direct’, and ‘indirect’. Since the most fateful dereliction (without admission, of course) from Cutter’s original intention occurred in early Library of Congress practice under Hanson, the tabulation (p. 184–201) of the process of construction of about 180 headings is very instructive about all sorts of compromises and deviations:

- *inversions* (to avoid ethnic-term entry, to avoid period-term entry, to avoid topic-adjectival entry . . .)
- *subheadings* (action followed by its object, object followed by action, bibliographical form . . .)
- *multiplicity of headings* (i.e., beyond that which Cutter would have sanctioned himself).

While Miksa accurately lets us see how often Cutter’s intentions are violated while being verbally bowed-down-to, I am not always persuaded that some of these Hanson-changes are not for the best – but this could be seen to be so only from the viewpoint of a theory that analyzed the terms implicitly as well as explicitly present in an ‘enriched’ phrasing of the document’s compendious (=comprehensive + compressed) description through the leading idea of wholes-and-parts and the rigid separation of terms into categories such as Things (concrete *v.* abstract); Disciplines; Relations (between Things, between Disciplines, between Things and Disciplines . . .). Such a theory might well emerge looking a lot like Ranganathan’s roles and levels, superadded to PMEST . . . But in any case an examination of Cutter’s own theory of classification, namely that classificatory relations are exhausted in the two narrower relations Whole/Part and Genus/Species – i.e., that Thing/Aspect is *not* a relation that he would accept as properly classificatory (p. 18; cf. 310) – is needed but not given, if we are to hope for a theory that could unite Cutter’s preference for specific entry with what seems useful to me, namely the natural tendency to see Parts as parts-of-Wholes, but Species and Aspects as independent of their ‘governing’ Genera and Things.

Some formal defects in Miksa’s magisterial work include omissions in the index: besides the Berman-omission mentioned above, ‘authority list’ (p. 159) is not registered – nor is it discussed to the extent that it deserves, especially in regard to Cutter’s own ideas not about the establishment of authoritative subject names or about allowed subarrangements, but rather about both the conceptual relations between subject names and the mechanical control of those relations – a whole area of discussion recently much polemicized in Mary

Dykstras's articles on the *non*-thesaural nature of LCSH⁵. Again, the surprising point that LCSH-headings are *derived* from LC classification – not wholly independent from it, as the received wisdom teaches – cannot be located in the index. Nor can be Haykin's 'positive' interpretation of 'specificity'. And a certain number of stylistic disharmonies jar against the reader's perception of the work's magisterially superior status: use of 'presently' to mean at present, of 'elemental' for elementary, of 'categorical' for categorial, of 'echelon' for chain, and of ambiguity-causing omissions of the conjunctive 'that'.

No book, despite these minor flaws in Miksa, is more necessary reading for whoever wants to understand American/Canadian alphabetical subject cataloguing and catalogues – or hopes to improve them – and who can doubt that improvement is crucially necessary?

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Notes:

- 1 Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1977. 344 pp.
- 2 Hc and his centrally typical work *Prejudices and Antipathies* are mentioned on p. 465, but are unrecorded in the bibliography or index.
- 3 For Cutter, '[t]he very definition of a subject implies that it already has a classificatory position' – an application of the 'Scottish theory of mental faculties' that Hc, along with many of his educated contemporaries, accepted (p. 61).
- 4 *Subject Catalogues: Headings and Structure*. London: Library Association, 1960. 186 pp.
- 5 "LC Subject Headings Disguised as a Thesaurus", *Library Journal* 113 (1. Mar. 1988) p. 42–46; and "Can Subject Headings be Saved?", *Library Journal* 113, (15. Sept. 1988), p. 55–58.

FÖRSCHNER, Franz: *Eine Theorie zum Schlagwortkatalog (A theory of the alphabetical subject catalogue)*. Wiesbaden: O.Harrassowitz 1987. 96p. = Buchwiss.Beiträge aus dem Deutschen Bucharchiv München, Bd.21.

The alphabetical subject catalogue, although widely used and esteemed as a user-friendly medium of subject cataloguing, still remains - in the German-speaking countries at least - the Cinderella of subject cataloguing research. In the past only the systematic catalogue and the classificatory access - surrounded by a welcome aura of earnest scholarship in search of the order of the universe - were deemed worthy of detailed research. Even today a lack of theory - sometimes deplored, more often ignored - determines both the alphabetical subject cataloguing practices in our libraries and most cataloguing rules (e.g. the "*Regeln für den Schlagwortkatalog*" RSWK). Therefore a publication, taking up the cause of the alphabetical subject catalogue and trying to seek out its "inner guiding principle" (p.1), deserves close attention.

In his study, to some extent influenced by the "Erlangen rules" (*Regeln für den Schlagwortkatalog*, "*Erlanger Regelwerk*", München 4.1977), Förschner formulates the essentials of the ideal alphabetical subject catalogue: the banishment of any deduction, a characteristic of the systematic catalogue, and thereby contra-

dictory to the nature of the alphabetical subject catalogue; the forbidding of subsets and, as a corollary to this, the principle that each subheading should introduce an entirely new subject; the banishment of the repetition of similar relationships on different levels of the entire string-of-terms (Gesamtschlagwort); an exacting demand on the tectonics of the Gesamtschlagwort: that each subheading should combine all previous terms to form a new unity; last but not least: the maxim of the definite succession of subheadings according to their degree of concreteness. In this context special mention should be made of the useful differentiation between 'concrete' and 'narrow' term: an important contribution to the idea of specific entry (cf.p.84).

Förschner offers, however, far more than a mere "theory of the alphabetical subject catalogue". To a large extent his remarkable study reads like a sensible apology of the (traditional) alphabetical subject catalogue, a catalogue which - according to Förschner - should be committed to the principle of the Gesamtschlagwort. The author never tires of praising its efficiency and reliability of access, its formal strength, logic and binding energy. Now and then these epistemological and syndetic categories are given aesthetic and stylistic values (cf. wordings such as "inner law of form", p.12, "elegant strength of form", p.13). Indeed, Förschner's concept of language cannot deny its idealistic origins: Although never explicitly expressed, (the cataloguer's language is considered as a dynamic, creative and shaping *energeia* (energy) rather than as a static and mechanical *ergon* (work).

In Förschner's study - far more sophisticated and ambitious than most previous German publications (cf.e.g., Karl Heinz Spieler's *Zur Theorie des Schlagwortkatalogs*, Berlin 1975) - the alphabetical subject catalogue is given a distinctive character as a medium of its own. In Förschner's opinion it has so many advantages that it does not run the risk of becoming obsolete with the rise of competitive subject access media such as online information retrieval, OPAC-catalogue, poly-hierarchical thesaurus. It is perhaps Förschner's essential merit to produce proof of the independence and sovereignty of the alphabetical subject catalogue: in its ideal form it is to be recommended for its sparing use of subheadings, its renunciation of too excessive permutations (cf., in this context, Förschner's criticism of PRECIS and RSWK, p.51-68), for its strict fixing of definite succession of subheadings, and its obligation to strive for the inner coherence of the *Gesamtschlagwort*.

It is much to be hoped that this interesting study, abundant in examples, rich in inspirations - most of them in sharp contrast to the dominant cataloguing philosophies and intellectual trends of our time - , will be read by a large part of the public, especially by those who are liable to doubt the value of any subject cataloguing theory and those who are too enthusiastic about the use of data processing as a means of producing 'promiscuous' chains and strings.

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