

Book Reviews

STUDWELL, William E.: **Library of Congress Subject Headings: Philosophy, Practice, and Prospects.** New York, London: The Haworth Press 1990. 120p., ISBN 1-56024-003-2

Whatever we may think about *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)*, they are, probably, the most frequently used system of verbal indexing worldwide. Having been devised almost a century ago, they are going to be with us in the future, in spite of all widespread criticism. Indeed, they are being adapted to the online age, for use in online public access catalogues. Some years ago, they were considered as feasible for American libraries as the *PRECIS* system; or, to put it more carefully: given all the investment that had by then gone into LCSH development and cataloguing practice in American libraries, it was not thought to be worthwhile to change to another system. Besides, *LCSH* are no longer restricted to English or American usage, but have been translated into French and were thought to provide the basis for a multilingual thesaurus.

Books and articles on *LCSH* have become quite as numerous as the number of headings themselves. Publishing yet another book on the subject, therefore, would need some words of explanation. This would be all the more required if the author's interest was not on some ideological, linguistic or technical aspect, but on the very philosophy of the *LCSH* cataloguing system, or, as Studwell explains in the preface to his book: "This volume is an effort to contribute towards the improvement of the theoretical bases of subject cataloguing, specifically the subject heading system established by the Library of Congress" (p.5). Studwell unmistakably states the purpose of his book as not to complement the numerous "everyday" guides to understanding and using *LCSH*. Studwell himself wrote several articles on various aspects of *LCSH* in recent years and must be considered, along with Chan, Cochrane and Daily, one of the most prolific writers on this subject.

Distinguishing three components of effective subject access, Studwell emphasizes two of them, the description of the system of subject cataloguing and its interpretation, while neglecting the third, the user's contact with subject access. This may be misleading, since all cataloguing, descriptive and particularly subject, needs, I think, some teleological framework to avoid what might be called "despair on the user's interface". Yet a dialectic turn would render the approach based on the theoretical foundations to be even more important than the user's point of view, for a sound understanding of the principles, - or rather the understanding of sound principles - is a precondition of successful use of the system. Apart from all methodological considerations, every attempt at *Improving LCSH for Use in Online Catalogs* (as Cochrane's seminal book on the subject is entitled) will draw the

attention to the theoretical foundation of the system and the consistency of its application.

Studwell divides his book into three parts: "system", "application", and "future". The first two deal with the present state of *LCSH* principles and practice, while "future" is devoted mainly to matters such as improving the connection between *LCSH* and the computer. He painstakingly subdivides each part into sections, developing his thread of arguments in a way similar to a philosophical textbook. The approach is clearly deductive, a succession of principles followed by numerous explanations, examples as well as cross-references to related principles. As for the "system", Studwell groups the outline of its principles into subcategories such as structural matters, terminology and language, specificity and detail, as well as, finally, presentation of subject heading data. As for the "application", there are subcategories of secondary headings, number of headings assigned, order of headings assigned, as well as parallelism of subject headings.

Having said that Studwell describes *LCSH*, this is not entirely correct. For his approach is rather critical, that is to say, his "principles" read very much like a list of all the "do's" and "do not's" of subject cataloguing. At times, these principles appear to verge on the trivial, for instance: "Structural elements in LC subject headings must be consistent", or "Rival headings' must be eliminated from LC subject headings", or "Reverse patterns' should not be permitted in LC subject headings". Of course, this is not at all Studwell's fault, since every user of *LCSH* may easily find out that LC subject headings are inconsistent, that there are rival headings, etc. Now all that has probably been observed before, and the literature on *LCSH* may, to a large degree, be considered as the attempt at providing consistency of form and content of *LCSH*. What makes Studwell's book valuable, though not unique, is the stringency of his approach and the wealth of examples provided. A subject index facilitates access. Moreover, it is what I would call a "positive" approach: system and application of *LCSH* must be improved and, as Studwell clearly points out, *LCSH* can be improved if the principles he states are being observed. By assembling, in a nutshell as it were, all the faulty points in *LCSH*, and by providing a concise, comprehensive and coherent way of explanation, Studwell paves the way to really improving *LCSH*. If *LCSH* are improved, along the principles outlined and summarized by Studwell (and by the authors cited in the book), *LCSH* will become an instrument of subject cataloguing feasible in the online age and rendering the investment that goes into it rewarding.

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Fachsystematik und Einzelsprachensystematik des Instituts für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster (The classification system for general linguistics and for single lan-