

# Brief Communication:

## Enhancing the Subject Headings Minting Capacity of the Sears List of Subject Headings: Some Suggestions

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**ABSTRACT:** *Sears List of Subject Headings* (Miller and McCarthy 2010), first published in 1923, is now in its 20<sup>th</sup> edition. Like most subject headings lists, apart from being a list of preferred (and non-preferred) headings, it also provides patterns, clear instructions, and examples for coining new subject headings not explicitly listed. Key headings form a vital part of the system of coining new headings. It is proposed that more key headings should be designated. Some candidate headings are described. One far-reaching provision seems to be the use of a subdivision of a preferred heading with all of its NTs. Thus, every preferred heading is a potential key heading for all of its NTs. This proposal works on the principle that what is true of a class is true of its narrower classes of all types. Applying this principle will enormously enhance the capacity of the *List* without adding even an iota to its text and size.

“It is only by being flexible and expandable that Sears has been able over the years to fill the needs of various kinds of libraries” (Miller and McCarthy 2010, x).

*Sears List of Subject Headings*, first published in 1923, is now in its 20<sup>th</sup> edition (Miller and McCarthy 2010). In about nine decades of its healthy life, it has survived changing fads in providing subject access to library collections. Now it has firmly established itself as a tool for creating subject authorities in small and medium libraries. Not only this, due to its handy size, affordable price, and clearly stated and illustrated principles of subject headings, it is equally being used to teach the theory and practice of subject headings in library schools (Weihs 2004).

Like most subject heading lists, apart from being a list of preferred (and non-preferred) headings, it also

provides patterns, clear instructions, and examples for coining new subject headings not explicitly listed. This has clearly been stated in the preface of the *Sears* (Miller and McCarthy 2010, x):

No list can possibly provide a heading for every idea, object, process, or relationship, especially not within the scope of a single volume. What Sears hopes to offer instead is a basic list that includes many of the headings most likely to be needed in small libraries together with patterns and examples that will guide the cataloguer in creating additional headings as needed. New to-

pics appear every day, and books on those topics require new subject headings. Headings for new topics can be developed from the Sears List. Instructions for creating new headings based on the pattern in Sears and sources for establishing the wording of new headings are given in the Principles of the Sears List.

Such hidden headings enormously outnumber the listed ones. This feature not only provides autonomy to the cataloguer, but also makes the operation of the list an intellectually stimulating task. No doubt, it is one of a few scholarly jobs in our profession.

There are three provisions the *Sears List* to coin new subject headings (xlii):

1. From the Key headings
2. From headings to be added by the cataloguer

The note here reads: “*Sears* is not intended to be a complete list of subject headings but only a list of the many of the most commonly used headings and a pattern for creating other headings as needed. Types of things and names of individual things must always be added when they are not already provided in the List (xlii).”

3. The third category is SA instructions, which, in fact, helps to precipitate the omitted headings whenever and wherever needed.

These are standardized and commonplace provisions with which a skilled cataloguer is already familiar. So these will not be elaborated here. Nevertheless, these provisions make *Sears* a subject headings spinning machine.

The *Sears* has always encouraged the formulation of new headings as clear from the following assertion (xliii):

The Sears List is unique among subject heading lists in that it does not attempt to be a complete list of terms used in any single library but only a list of headings most likely to be needed in a typical small library and a skeleton or pattern for creating other headings as needed. By using the Sears List as a foundation, the cataloguer in a small library can develop a local authority list that is consistent in form and comprehensive for that library. This has proven over the years to be a practical and economical solution to the cataloging needs of small libraries.

Because the Sears List is not a complete authority list, the cataloguer using the Sears List must take an active part in developing a larger vocabulary of terms. As an aid in this process we offer the ... discussion of the basic principles of subject analysis and the construction and control of subject headings.

In addition to the explicit provision, there are some odd and not-much-exploited provisions in the *Sears List* to coin new headings. For example, in the entry **Education** (253), it is clearly instructed: “Subdivisions listed under this heading may be used under other education headings where applicable.” With this permission, we can have headings like:

**Co education—Curricula—India**  
**Co education—Developing Countries**  
**Elementary education—Aims and objectives**

What is more important and which is not stated is that where **Education** is a subdivision, then other types of education should also be allowed to be used as subdivision. If allowed, we can easily have the following headings:

**Women—Special education**  
**Women—Technical education**  
**Blind—Vocational education**  
**Prisoners—Adult education**  
**Prisoners—Vocational education**

This provision should also be extended to phrase headings to coin new headings. For example, **Radio in education** can be used as a pattern to have meaningful headings such as:

**Radio in adult education**  
**Radio in continuing education**  
**Radio in family life education**  
**Radio in health education**  
**Radio in moral education**  
**Television in physical education**

Thus numerous headings can be coined for different types of education.

Under the heading **Libraries** (450), there is no such provision to use its subdivisions for other types of libraries. But on the analogy of **Education**, we could use the subdivisions under **Libraries** for other types of libraries. From the subject heading **Libraries—Special collections**, we can derive headings such as

**Academic libraries—Special collections**

Which can be further extended as per instructions:

**Academic libraries—Special collection—Science fiction**

**Academic libraries—Special collection—Video tapes**

**Academic libraries—Automation—India**

**Church libraries—Censorship**

**Special libraries—Equipment and supplies**

**Children's libraries—Acquisitions**

Extending it further, phrase headings can be coined by replacing the term “library” with the type of the library. From the heading **Library architecture**, we can derive headings such as:

**Academic libraries architecture—India**

**Academic libraries catalogues**

**Academic libraries cooperation**

**Academic libraries finance**

**Academic libraries resources**

**Academic libraries services**

**Academic libraries surveys**

It may be noted that, in these phrase headings, the plural form has been used in conformity with the existing heading **Academic libraries**. Of course, many more technically correct headings can be coined by innovative and enterprising cataloguers and entered in the local authority list.

One wonders why the subdivisions provided under **President—United States** cannot be applied to **Vice-president**. If allowed, we can easily coin headings like:

**Vice-presidents—United States—Appointment**

**Vice-presidents—United States—Election**

**Vice-presidents—United States—Family**

**Vice-presidents—United States—Home**

**Vice-presidents—United States—Nomination**

**Vice-presidents—United States—Protection**

We can even have headings like **Vice-presidents' spouses**. Of the geographical subdivision, the US can be replaced with any other appropriate country, e.g.,

**Vice-presidents—India—Election**

Key headings form a vital part of the system of coining new headings. This short list (xliii) has been taken

for a long time. It would be time to identify and designate more key headings. Some candidate headings for such elevated positions are obvious. **Bible** has about seventy headings, whereas **Koran** has only two, and **Vedas** is a loner. Most of the Biblical phrase headings or subdivisions can be smoothly transferred to other scriptures. If **Bible** is made a key heading, then its topical subdivisions can easily be transferred to other scriptures. On this permission, we can have headings like:

**Vedas—Astronomy**

**Vedas—Commentaries**

**Vedas—Inspiration**

**Vedas—Parables**

**Vedas—Use**

Extending this to **Koran**, we can have

**Koran—Antiquities**

**Koran—Chronologies**

**Koran—Concordances**

**Koran—Evidences, authorities, etc.**

**Koran—Geography**

**Koran—History**

**Koran—Prophecies**

This mutation can also be continued in phrase headings to have:

**Vedas and science**

**Vedas and literature**

**Ramayana films**

**Koran in literature**

**Koran stories**

**Koranic cosmology**

**Vedic cosmology**

And further:

**Salvation—Koranic teaching**

**Family—Koranic teaching**

By analogy with **Bible. NT**, we can have

**Vedas. Rig Veda**

**Vedas.Sam Veda**

**Vedas.Athrava Veda**

**Vedas.Yajur Veda**

That seems easy and hassle-free. The only need is to designate **Bible** as a key heading and beef it up with

more needed subdivisions. Another heading that seems to be of the caliber of key heading is **Napoleon I, Emperor of the French**.

One more far-reaching latent provision seems to be the use of a subdivision of a preferred heading with all of its NTs. We could treat every preferred heading as potential or local key heading for all of its NTs. For example, from the heading **Flowers**, we could coin:

**Roses—United States**  
**Roses—Drying**  
**Roses—Arrangement**  
**Roses in art**

and even

**Artificial roses**

To use another example, under the heading **Houses** (382), the NTs *inter alia* are:

**Apartment houses**  
**Prefabricated houses**  
**Solar houses**

One of the topical subdivision of **Houses** is “**Buying and selling**,” which may further be divided geographically. Applying this principle, we can easily construct subject headings such as:

**Apartment houses—Buying and selling**  
**Apartment houses—Buying and selling—New York**  
**Fabricated houses—Buying and selling**  
**Solar houses—Buying and selling—New Delhi**

To cite a few more examples on the basis of the listed **Computer Software Industry**, we can have headings like **Computer games industry**. And from **Journalism**, we can have

**Broadcasting journalism—Objectivity**  
**Reporters and reporting—Objectivity**

This proposal works on the principle that what is true of a class is true of its narrower classes of all types. Systems of subject headings seem to follow the principle of phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny, or the transmission of genetic traits from parents to offspring.

Applying this principle will enormously enhance the capacity of the *List* without adding even an iota to its text and size. Awaited is a word of authorization from the editors for consistent use and uniformity. The only requirement of the editors is that they make this provision explicitly stated in the “Principles.”

## References

- Miller, Joseph, ed., and McCarthy, Susan, assoc. ed. 2010. *Sears list of subject headings*. 20<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: H.W. Wilson Co.
- Weihs, Jean. 2004. Musings on an unscientific survey of Sears use. *Technicalities* 24n3: 5-7.