EDITORIAL

Reflections on Trends in Classification

Man's intellectual life on this earth seems to be similar to the motions of the waves of the sea: a continual up and down, a swaying and rocking. Hardly has one reached the peak of a wave crest when one feels pulled down again into the next wave trough, knowing, however, that the next upward movement is already foreshading itself.

Classification - hence man's ability to order his intellectual being, to create an order of knowledge - is likewise embedded in this eternal wave motion and subjected to the ups and down of changing recognitions and needs. Ever since mind-endowed human beings haved lived on this earth they have tried to order the things they know in many imaginable ways - of which the history of mankind itself is the best proof.

As man's knowledge grew, his ordering possibilities diversified. As recently as in the past century, philosophers on the one hand and librarians on the other hand tried to produce a meaningful and practicable order of knwoledge in the form of classification systems, of which particularly a few library-oriented systems have survived until this very day. Since World War II, however, we have also witnessed a development marked by a decline of the use of these systems and the advent of new, individualizing rather than general manners of ordering, namely the assignment of controlled and non-controlled descriptive elements as ordering characteristics for the identification of documents and objects of every nature and for the description of their contents. As methods changed, however, so did purposes - or was it the other way round? The newer methods of ordering were no longer directed so much at the filing of information as at the availability and combinability of information units - also called informemes (Diemer) - in any store.

Now we are once again experiencing a new wave phase in which, to be sure, the special ordering systems developed in the past years continue - like the universal systems of the past - to be used wherever no other needs call for changes, but in which quite generally a trend towards centralization of information services is making itself felt again today, a trend resulting from the necessity to collect computerized abstracts journals and bibliographies at a given location and to process and prepare them for the widest possible variety of user needs. This processing and preparation requires, on the one hand, integrated thesauri, hence controlled descriptor lists from various agencies, which can be mutually compared and suitably coordinated so that their elements can be used interchangeably. On the other hand it is possible to make use of the procedures of numerical taxonomy to "tailor" units of large bibliographic collections for the demand of specific user interests. It was H. Borko who pointed to this new possibility at last year's FID/CR conference.

Quite organically, hence, the growth of the literature and of its references, as well as the economical, rationalized use of literature information has led to centralized, computerized information administration requiring correspondingly well-prepared integrated or compatible thesauri and special classifications for being able to offer services in a user-oriented fashion. We are starting in this issue with two of the papers of a conference on compatibility of retrieval languages held at Columbus, Ohio, Oct.17, 1982. They are a continuation of the articles on this subject which have been included in the issues of the last two years. This shows that the wave movement directed toward compatible systems is currently on the increase, and so, with it, is the awareness that we ought to get away from the previous individualistic approach to be able to avail ourselves of the existing possibilities for cooperation. "Synthesis", hence the combination of isolated units into an organic whole, thus seems to be the demand of the moment.

A "synthesis", however, requires a theory or a structure into which combination is possible. Thus it becomes clear that a theoretical framework must be present both f o r m a l l y and m a t e r i a l l y to permit an overall whole which will not fall apart again the very next moment. "Formally" means that a theory of knowledge or, better, of the concept should be introduced or accepted which permits conceptual analyses and syntheses and which explains, and can make reproduceable, the structural interconnections of knowledge. "Materially" means that theories should be found which permit disciplines, sciences and even the overall total of all fields of knowledge to be understood and interrelated from the point of view of their contents, i.e. of their ontological nature.

In the past few years this journal has published a whole series of articles both on the aforementioned formal approach (subject: conceptual analysis and synthesis) and on the material approach. Now the time seems to have come to dig deeper into the contents of these articles and to make use of their results for tackling the aformentioned synthesis of systems. Works and projects to this end should now be taken in hand, and this on a larger scale than is being envisaged at the moment through the single pilot study of an integrated thesaurus in the social sciences (Unesco project) to be prepared by Mrs. Jean Aitchison.

This is not solely a matter, however, of creating integrated or integratable systems. As side effects, both formal and material insights will come to light, hence insights pertaining both to the development and mastery of the methods necessary for this work and to the new knowledge on the contents-governed interrelationships among our concepts, hence our knowledge elements. This, however, means a challenge by classification to the sciences themselves.

It seems also to be about time for this knowledge to be introduced at the universities as well, namely by the students being confronted at a quite early stage already with the problems mentioned here and by their even beginning their factual studies under these aspects, namely: how is knowledge structured, what classifications of knowledge exist, how can knowledge be ordered? At its 7th Annual Convention in Königswinter/Rhein, the Society for Classification deals also with this complex of questions (see the program in this issue) to bring courses on the organization of knowledge into the g e n e r a l program of universities. May this be a useful suggestion for other countries as well!

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