Book Reviews

Margaret Rohdy, Editor

Understanding Subject Headings in Library Catalogs. Karen M. Drabenstott, with the research assistance of Schelle Simcox and Eileen G. Fenton. Ann Arbor, Mich.: School of Information, University of Michigan, 1998. 227p. $14. Also available by anonymous ftp at ftp.si.umich.edu.

The 1991 Subject Subdivisions Conference was convened at Airlie House by the Library of Congress (LC) to get input from the American library community on directions in which to proceed with improvements in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)*. Conway (1992) provides a detailed report of the conference, which is part of the legacy of innovation and cooperation from Lucia Rather's 1976–1991 term as LC director for cataloging. Many of the suggestions considered at Airlie House have been implemented by LC, and the conference also gave rise to a body of research, much of it echoing Cochrane's (1986) pragmatic ingenuity about *LCSH* in the online environment. Conference participants have published valuable studies of issues explored at Airlie House, most recently in Chan and Vizine-Goetz (1998).

Perhaps the most conspicuous contributor, both as a researcher and an educator, has been Karen M. Drabenstott. *Understanding Subject Headings in Library Catalogs* is the most recent of these publications. Its impetus was an Airlie House conference recommendation to simplify subject cataloging by standardizing the subject subdivisions in a fixed order of topical, geographic, chronological, and form. Existing LC subject headings employ a complex variety of conflicting patterns. A concern raised at the conference was that rearranging the order of subdivisions would alter the meaning of some headings;

however there was, in fact, little knowledge of how subject headings are understood by library users. Drabenstott's study seeks to answer just that question: "What does a subject heading mean?"

Subject indexing is the Jello-nailing part of bibliographic control: the inherently subjective, nebulous nature of the process presents an obstacle to empirical study. The design and execution of a rigorous method of study, one capable of replication, may be the most enduring contribution of this project.

Drabenstott generated lists of frequently occurring subdivided subject headings and of randomly selected subdivided subject headings from the OCLC Online Union Catalog. She selected 24 subdivided subject headings likely to change in meaning when their subdivisions were reordered. Examples included:

Housing -- United States -- Law and legislation

Handicapped -- Washington (State) -- Seattle metropolitan area -- Transportation

Jews -- Germany -- Berlin -- Intellectual life -- Congresses

Organ music -- 17th century -- Interpretation (phrasing, dynamics, etc.)

Drabenstott then prepared questionnaires corresponding to three sets of eight subject headings. Within the sets, questionnaires varied the context in which subject headings were presented (i.e., alone, in bibliographic records, or in alphabetical browsing lists) and the order of subdivisions (i.e., original or recommended order). An expert librarian gave meanings to the subject headings in the different contexts and orders. Her meanings agreed with those of a second librarian with comparable experience.

The questionnaires were then distributed to children and adults at three public libraries in southeastern Michigan. The participants formulated meanings for the listed subject headings, designating on a scale of 1 to 7 their certainty of each meaning. The same three sets of questionnaires were also distributed to professional reference and technical services librarians around the country. The responses were compared to the expert's meanings and each judged correct or incorrect. Specific codes identifying differences in syntax, language, and leaving out or reading in concepts were also assigned to describe why the meaning was correct or incorrect.

Percentage of correct meanings by respondent group were as follows: children, 32%; adults, 40%; reference librarians, 53%; and technical services librarians, 56%. Percentages were a little lower for headings in the standardized order than in the original order of subdivisions. Overall, the lowest percentages came from children, but there were exceptions to this pattern. In one example, children did better than technical services librarians! All were less certain of their incorrect meanings than their correct meanings; however, none formulated meanings that favored a specific incorrect meaning code.

The narrowest research question was answered clearly: "Statistical and failure analyses failed to demonstrate that subdivision order made a difference in terms of understanding subject headings" (p. xviii). LC should standardize the order of subdivisions to simplify cataloging and save money. Staff would no longer spend time determining the order of subject subdivisions and could introduce computer-based techniques that would reduce the errors that occur in subject headings due to subdivision order (Drabenstott and Vizine-Goetz 1994, 113–20).

Broad implications for further study are presented. Various groups, including children, reference librarians, and subject experts should be involved in establishing new subject headings. Future studies could examine the characteristics that are likely to identify a difficult subject heading and the extent to which context changes the meaning of subject head-

ings. End-user understanding of *Sears Subject Headings, Medical Subject Headings,* Yahoo! subject headings, and comparable systems should be investigated, adopting the codes used in this study for comparisons between different systems. Above all, this study confirms an enduring commitment to *LCSH*. It demonstrates that scientific analysis can improve its development and use.—*J. Bradford Young (jbyoung@pobox.upenn.edu), Otto E. Albrecht Music Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*

Works Cited

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Drabenstott, Karen Markey and Diane Vizine-Goetz. 1994. *Using subject headings for online retrieval: Theory, practice, and potential.* San Diego, Calif.: Academic Press.

Improving Online Public Access Catalogs. Martha M. Yee and Sara Shatford Layne. Chicago: American Library Association, 1998. 220p. $48 (ISBN 0-8389-0730-X). LC 98-6217.

In *Improving Online Public Access Catalogs,* Yee and Layne focus on specific improvements in systems design for online catalogs. Both authors, Yee in particular, are known for their expertise in cataloging and its impact on information retrieval. After an introductory discussion of indexing and display options for current online catalogs, the authors examine and discuss how system design affects retrieval, offering suggestions on how to improve design to better assist all