6.2.3. Subject authority files

Overview

This module presents the big picture of subject authority files and their functions. It contains links to explanations and examples of major thesauri and subject headings lists available on the Web. To review:

- Subject authority files are databases or collections of subject authority records
- Subject authority records contain controlled vocabulary representing subjects
- Two kinds of subject authority files are thesauri and subject headings lists

In indexing and cataloging, subject authority files serve as . . .

- Sources of index terms
- Tools for precoordinate indexing

In searching, subject authority files serve as . . .

- Source of search terms
- Source of general knowledge
- Tool for navigating and browsing

Authority work is itself an important area of professional practice. Among other things, it requires constant attention to changes in language and usage during thesaurus development and file maintenance. A number of general resources explain principles and design of subject authority files and give examples, including:

Publications on thesaurus construction and use at http://www.willpowerinfo.co.uk/thesbibl.htm

Thesauri and controlled vocabularies online at http://www.mnazari.com/InfoLit/Site_files/98.htm
Thesauri

Thesauri are used by *indexers* (not catalogers). Generally . . .

- The domain is limited to a single discipline or subdiscipline.
- Index terms are called subject terms or *descriptors*.
- Most terms represent single concepts, intended for *postcoordination* (combining at the time of searching).
- Syndetic structure indicates semantic relationships (BT, NT, etc.).
- Terms are applied at the entity level of the whole document and its subparts.
- Many terms are assigned to a field.

Thesaurus Standards

The world of bibliographic control has standards for standards. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and National Information Standards Organization (NISO) are bodies of experts who set criteria for content and consistency of thesauri.

- ISO 2788—Documentation: Guidelines for the establishment and development of monolingual thesauri
- ISO 5964—Documentation: Guidelines for the establishment and development of multilingual thesauri provide descriptors for indexing and searching

Thesaurus Examples

The history and purpose of prominent thesauri, along with explanations of their structures, are available on several informative Web sites. Some sites allow online searching of the thesaurus.

- Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors
  http://searcheric.org/
- Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)
  http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/aat/
Subject headings

Subject headings lists are used by catalogers. Generally . . .

- The domain is broad, often encompassing multiple disciplines.
- Index terms are called subject headings.
- Terms may represent multiple concepts that are precoordinated (combined at the time of cataloging) or single concepts.
- Syndetic structure indicates semantic relationships (see, see also or BT, NT, etc.).
- Terms are applied at the entity level of the whole document.
- About one to three precoordinated terms are assigned to a field.

Major examples are Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Sears Subject Headings.

Note: For IOP purposes, you are going to be an indexer using a thesaurus.

Subject Headings List Examples

- Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)
  http://www.tlcdelivers.com/tlc/crs/shed0014.htm
  http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/fi_books_sh.htm

- Sears List of Subject Headings
  http://www.slais.ubc.ca/courses/libr517/03-04-wt2/projects/KidsCatWeb/Sears/SearsLayout.html

- Medical Subject Headings (MeSH)