University of Mosul

College of Arts
Department of Information and Knowledge Technologies
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Subject Headings: Standards and Formulation

The Concept of Subject Cataloging

The subject aspect is one of the most important and complex parts of the bibliographic preparation process of information sources. It is represented by the process of subject cataloging, which involves selecting and formulating subject headings and identifying the thematic content of a cultural document.

Subject cataloging is defined as a library technical process applied to information sources in order to determine their intellectual content by selecting one or more terms (called subject headings) under which all materials dealing with that subject are grouped and accessed through the catalog.

Libraries must rely on a specific list of subject headings to choose the appropriate terms and references. For Arabic topics, this may include the Major Arabic Subject Headings List or Al-Khazindar's List. For foreign topics, the Library of Congress Subject Headings or Sears List can be adopted.

Criteria for Choosing Subject Headings

Some of the main considerations when choosing appropriate subject headings include:

Library Size:
Small libraries such as school or public libraries with fewer than 20,000 volumes do not require as much subdivision of subject headings as large academic or public libraries.

Library Type:
Specialized libraries serving a specific group of users in a certain field require more detailed and specific headings compared to libraries that serve general public interests.

User Profile:

It is easier to choose headings for a specialized group than for a broad audience with diverse interests.

Degree of Specificity:
The depth of analysis varies depending on library size, goals, and user needs.

Library Policy:
Subject heading selection is also influenced by the cataloging policies, tools, and cataloging rules adopted by the library.

Principles for Choosing Subject Headings

The foundation of subject heading practices dates back to 1876 with Charles Cutter's rules in his book on dictionary cataloging, which served as a basis for major subject heading lists like the Library of Congress and Sears.

Key principles include:

1. Principle of Specific Entry

Choose the most specific term that accurately represents the subject. Cutter stated: "Enter the work under its subject, not under the broader heading that contains that subject".

For example, a book on "machine engineering" should be indexed under "Machines" or "Car Engines", not the broader "Mechanical Engineering".

Specificity can also be increased by adding qualifiers such as form, place, or time. For instance, "Islamic Architecture—History—116–748" is more precise than just "Islamic Architecture".

Challenges include determining the appropriate level of specificity and whether it should depend on the library or the document itself. The notion of specificity is relative and may differ between libraries.

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2. Terminological Consistency

To allow the catalog to gather all materials on a topic in one place, it is essential to use a single, consistent term. This requires selecting the term most familiar to users and used by authors, as well as those imposed by subject heading lists.

Types of term relationships:

Synonymy:
Different terms may express the same concept (e.g., "Construction" vs. "Building"). One preferred term should be selected, with others redirected to it.

Inclusion (Hierarchical):
A broader term includes narrower ones (e.g., "Building Materials" includes "Bricks").

Part-Whole Relationship:
One term is a part of another (e.g., "Piston" is part of an "Engine").

Antonymy (Opposites):
Opposing terms like "Roughness" vs. "Smoothness" or "Motion" vs. "Stillness".

Mutual Exclusion:
Terms that are conceptually distinct but often grouped cyclically (e.g., seasons, days of the week).

Association:
Related terms not in a hierarchical relation (e.g., "Soil" and "Foundations" in Civil Engineering).

Challenges in Arabic Subject Headings

Some of the major challenges include:

Regional Differences:
Different countries use different terms for the same concept (e.g., "Bridges" in Iraq vs. "Culverts" in Egypt).

Homonyms:
Arabic words with identical pronunciation but different meanings (e.g., "Cancer" can refer to the disease, the zodiac sign, or the animal).

Language Variants:
Conflict between standard Arabic and local dialects. Standard Arabic is preferred, but sometimes local terms are more common (e.g., "Tabooq" vs. "Ajar").

Foreign Terminology:
Foreign words adopted into Arabic (e.g., "Police" vs. "Shurta", or "Telephone" vs. "Hatif"). Preferred terms are those widely used and stable in both literature and among users.