

I Introduction

Today searching for information using words and phrases from natural language has become the norm. Everybody knows how to use a search engine, and most people will start a search by entering the name of whatever it is they wish to find out about. Although directory style methods of organizing information on websites are also common, many searchers find it simplest and easiest just to put some appropriate words into a search box. The existence of so much information in electronic format reinforces this approach, since it is easy to process huge quantities of text very rapidly, mechanically matching strings of characters to locate and retrieve the sought terms.

This increasing preference for language-based retrieval is mirrored in managed information resources, databases, indexes and bibliographies, and library catalogues. While the classification scheme was the dominant means of organization and retrieval in libraries for two-thirds of the twentieth century, with the arrival of the first automated systems in the 1950s and 1960s, there was an accompanying move towards language as the basis of indexing, and the emergence of tools such as keyword lists and thesauri. These have continued to be the norm for electronic collections or for collections where physical access and browsing are not important. In the library context, where automated retrieval by means of an online catalogue is combined with a substantial physical collection of documents, the subject heading list has usually been considered a more appropriate system.

This is particularly noticeable in the UK, where the use of subject headings in library catalogues has become widespread over the last 20 years. A number of factors have doubtless contributed to this situation: greater awareness of, and access to, subject headings through the medium of web-based catalogues; the advantages of bibliographic information sharing made possible by this phenomenon; the consequent need for standardization, particularly of the bibliographic tools used; and the ease of retrieval using words, as noted above. Why the subject heading list, rather

than the thesaurus, should be preferred is not altogether clear, but it is now very well entrenched in most academic libraries of the developed world, the UK being one of the few countries not to have its own national system of subject headings.

As a consequence, the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) has been adopted by British libraries, in common with other English speaking nations, and several non-English speaking ones which use them in translation. Considerable impetus was provided by the British Library's decision in 1995 to abandon its Compass (previously PRECIS) subject indexing system in favour of LCSH, not only for the Library's own catalogues, but also on MARC records, and in the *British National Bibliography*. Since that time, LCSH has spread rapidly through the UK academic library community, although it has yet to be adopted in public library catalogues.

In the first instance, the Library of Congress developed LCSH as the principal means of subject access to its own collections, without any great expectation that anyone else would use them, although they were quickly taken up by a number of American libraries. For many decades this continued to be the situation, until libraries began to adopt them on a much greater scale, and on a worldwide basis. This meant that there was more incentive to make them less 'Americo-centric', and this need, together with the establishment of co-operative cataloguing projects, has led to a more considerable level of input from outside the Library of Congress. Nowadays it is possible to suggest new headings or modifications of existing ones via the Library of Congress website. When the British Library reintroduced LCSH in 1995, the first new heading proposed by them was **Luminescent probes**, and the first exclusively British heading was **Ring ouzel**, a bird of the thrush family unknown in North America.

LCSH, which was first conceived over a hundred years ago, has thus been in a state of continuous development and evolution during the twentieth, and into the twenty-first, century. LCSH is used today not only in library catalogues but in many bibliographic resources, abstracting and indexing services, and other databases. The current edition has more than 280,000 headings, from **A10 (Jet attack plane)** to **Zyxin**, and has been translated into many languages, including Turkish, Czech, Greek, Flemish, Hungarian and Portuguese, and is used in countries as far afield as Brazil, Belgium, Lithuania and Malaysia.

What is LCSH?

LCSH is an alphabetical list of the subject headings that are used in the catalogues of the Library of Congress, together with thesaurus-type cross-references that enable cataloguers to navigate the list and to find other appropriate headings. A typical section of LCSH looks something like this:

Moose (May Subd Geog)

UF Alces alces
Alces americana
Elk, European
European elk

BT **Alces**
RT **Cookery (Moose)**
NT **Moose calves**

Moose calves (May Subd Geog)

UF Moose--Infancy
Calves, Moose
BT **Animals--Infancy**
Moose

Moose County (Imaginary place) (Not Subd Geog)

BT Imaginary places

Moose (Dog) (Not Subd Geog)

BT **Dogs**

Moose, Elliot (Fictitious character)

USE **Elliot Moose (Fictitious character)**

Moose elm

USE **Slippery elm**

When we consider the practical application of LCSH, we will look in more detail at the layout, and at what the different cross-references and typographical variations mean, so you don't need to worry about these at this stage.

The purpose of the subject headings is to allow users to find material on a particular subject. The classification scheme used at the Library of Congress is a very broad classification and although it aims to provide a unique call number for every book, this is achieved by using author names and dates of publication as additions to the classmark, rather than by very

detailed subject classes. As a result, the classification functions primarily as a shelf location device, rather than as a tool for subject searching and retrieval. LCSH was developed for that role, and you will sometimes come across the phrase ‘the burden of retrieval’, which is borne by the subject headings; that is to say, the work of finding documents is carried out by the subject headings.

LCSH is an example of a controlled indexing language, which means there are strict rules for the way in which headings can be used. It is also a standard, which implies that all its users should conform to those rules so that LCSH is consistently applied in all the libraries that use it. This ensures that searches can be carried out on more than one catalogue (or in merged catalogues) and achieve comparable results for the same query. For this to happen, individual libraries should not change the headings or interpret them to meet local needs, although undoubtedly this does happen quite often.

The format of LCSH

The print version of LCSH comes in five volumes containing the headings themselves (sometimes called the red books), which is now in its 33rd edition (2011). The collection of rules for application of LCSH, the *Subject Headings Manual*, is published separately in a loose-leaf format. LCSH is also available on the web as part of *Classification Web* (<http://classificationweb.net>), although this product does not contain the *Subject Headings Manual*, which is available electronically as part of another Library of Congress electronic resource, *Cataloger’s Desktop*.

Beginners often find the printed volumes easier to use than the online version, since it gives them a broader view and a better sense of the context of headings. When you are more familiar with the scheme, the online LCSH is undoubtedly quicker and easier to search, and it uses hypertext to link directly to the classification, which is immensely helpful if you are using both. The examples used in this book are taken from the online version of LCSH, and from the online catalogue of the Library of Congress.

The Policy and Standards Division at the Library of Congress maintains LCSH and produces the published version. Updates of the print version appear on an annual basis and *Classification Web* can be continuously updated. Weekly lists of new and changed headings are posted on the Acquisitions and Cataloging website, and updates to the *Subject Headings Manual* are available as a free download from the Cataloging Distribution Services

website at www.loc.gov/cds/PDFdownloads/scm/index.html. Headings of current interest and amendments to headings are also published at regular intervals in the *Cataloging Service Bulletin* which is available as a free download at www.loc.gov/cds/PDFdownloads/csb/index.html.

The Library of Congress provides an excellent range of free online resources for cataloguers and classifiers, which can easily be explored starting from the 'Resources for librarians' link on the Library's home page.

