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THE LANDSCAPE OF CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN SUBJECT ACCESS (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

Subject access in Canada, whether through subject headings, classification, thesauri or other structures, is dominated by systems originally created in the United States. Building on a 2019 literature review that identified current subject access systems and developing projects in the Canadian context, this paper will explore the patterns of divergence and convergence between systems and across borders. As subject access systems from the United States do not meet all the needs of Canadian scholarship, next steps include considering how these gaps and distortions impact Canadian scholarship and what institutions in Canada are doing to create systems consistent with their values.

1   Introduction

Currently in Canada the primary systems of bibliographic subject access are adaptations or derivatives of systems developed originally in the United States (US). Although the landscape of Canadian subject access is dominated by US institutions and systems, they often do not meet the needs of Canadian context and scholarship. Building on a literature review which identified Canadian-born subject access systems currently in use or being developed, this paper will explore the ways in which Canadian systems have derived, diverged, or converged from and into US precedents and contemporaries. Paying particular attention to Canada's multilingual and multicultural context, this paper will use the literature review as a starting point to identify patterns in the evolution of the landscape of Canadian subject access, considering the impact of these trajectories on Canadian research and scholarship.

2   Literature Review

Conducted in the Spring of 2019, this literature review identified 44 projects, 15 of which are adaptations of some kind, and 29 which are standalone projects. The aim for the scope of this review was to be as comprehensive as possible in terms of subject matter. Our broad definition of subject access included multiple forms of knowledge organization, including classification systems, subject heading languages, taxonomies and thesauri, among others. To balance this broad subject, the scope was refined and narrowed in other ways. For example, the timeframe was limited to exclude anything published pre-2000 and the review was geographically limited

as well to focus on projects that were either created, or actively used, in Canada. However, there were several projects or papers from international contexts that were also valuable to consider. These included multilingual projects in Europe that evolved partially from Canadian systems (Bélair 2005; Landry 2004), as well as several Indigenous knowledge organization projects from the United States (Lincoln 2003; Littletree & Metoyer 2015; Martens 2006; Powell 2007).

2.1   Patterns and sites of significant focus

Of those projects and systems created in Canada, the most well documented pertain to Indigenous knowledge organization (IKO) in some way, these being the Brian Deer Classification System (BDCS), the adaptations of BDCS at Xwi7xwa (Doyle 2006), the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs (Cherry & Mukunda 2015), and at the Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute (Swanson 2015). Additional IKO systems include the First Nations House of Learning (FNHL) subject headings (Doyle, Lawson, & Dupont 2015), Digital Library North (Farnel et. al. 2017; Shiri & Stobbs 2018), and the Modifications to LCSH for use by Manitoba Archives (MAIN) (Bone 2016; Bone & Lougheed 2018). These examples represent just a few of the systems of IKO actively in use or being developed in Canada today.

Another area of ongoing research in the realm of Canadian subject access is the bi- or multilingual capabilities of these systems. In some instances, systems are fully bilingual such as the Parks Canada Classification system (Dunn 2015). However, it is also common to use separate but complementary English and French systems. For example, Canadian Subject Headings and Le Répertoire de Vedettes-Matière are regularly used in tandem (Desrochers 2013; Dolbec 2006). Others like the Inuit Language Cataloguing Standards are multilingual (Rigby 2015). One additional project stands out as an active site of research and investigation, this being the Taxonomy for Image Indexing And RetrievAl (TIIARA). Despite this project's Canadian origins, it has moved away from localization in favor of interoperability with international standards and audiences (Ménard & Dorey 2014). TIIARA is not alone in its international focus, other Canadian-born systems that frame themselves as universal include Basic Concepts Classification (Szostack 2012) and Universal Binary Classification (Fadaie Araghi, 2004).

Many of the systems already named are located or produced within academic libraries, or through Library and Archives Canada. Outside of these primary sites, but still firmly within the realm of subject access, are provenance or function-based systems such as the CODOC, the Cooperative Documents System (Lambert 2011) and Business-based Classification Structure (BCS) in the governmental realm (Park & Neal 2012). Canadian-born subject access systems for youth materials include sur~F, a student interest-based classification system, (Gibson 2011) and Exercise, Symbolique, Assemblage, Règles (ESAR), a system for organizing games (Filiatrault, 2014). Other projects which are also slightly outside the traditional library context include the Hansard Index, the primary method of subject access in parliamentary proceedings and therefore also parliamentary libraries (McClung 2009), as well as Keysigns - the only identified project to address subject access in American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des Sourds du Québec (LSQ), the two most dominant sign languages in Canada (Goodrum 2008).

3   Discussion

Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to the breadth of types of systems and their manifold applications, there is a notable lack of theoretical consistency among these projects. More surprising, however,

was the lack of theoretical work in general. This may, in part, be due to the fact that much of the documentation of these systems is project-based. For although the theoretical basis for many of these projects often went unmentioned, many more did refer fairly clearly to methodological approaches and workflows. Several exceptions have to be made, certainly there were several projects actively working with and centering Indigenous epistemologies. Within this particular lens, specific approaches emphasized relationally, participatory structures, and iterative processes (Cherry & Mukunda 2015; Doyle, Lawson, & Dupont 2015; Farnel et. al. 2018; Laroque 2018; Swanson 2015) Other projects, namely those with universal aims, drew on classic principles of classification and its canonical developments, naming Ranganathan and Coates (Fadaie Araghi 2004; Szostack 2012).

Several gaps in the literature were identified. One of the most striking was a lack of any documentation of subject access in non-official, yet widely-spoken languages in Canada, such as Mandarin, Cantonese, or Punjabi. It should be noted, however, that although bi/multilingualism and multiculturalism were all used as search terms during the literature review, specific languages were not. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that research and discussions of these languages and their intersections with English and/or French in the bibliographic world are happening, just simply outside of an explicitly Canadian context, or outside of the more traditional avenues of academic publishing that this review was limited to. Certainly, there are other countries which, like Canada, have official bi or multilingual status and therefore must also cope with such issues in their own systems.

Ultimately, although many Canadian-born systems of subject access were identified in this literature review, the majority of subject access systems in Canada which receive the highest quantity of use are derivatives or adaptations of those created in the United States. Additionally, much of the current scholarship within the discipline of library and information science which refers to multilingualism or multiculturalism is either very broadly web-based and not specific to Canada, or is focused on immigration, collections, or programming services rather than subject access or knowledge organization. The majority of active, Canadian, projects that combine multilingual subject access with a rigorous theoretical basis are in some way connected to Indigenous communities who are perhaps best suited, and may feel more urgency, to subvert the western paradigms and epistemologies that support dominant systems of subject access and knowledge organization.

4   Conclusion
While the literature review focused on the preliminary work of identifying ongoing projects, their characteristics, and knowledge organization specialists' approach to creating subject access for the Canadian context, this presentation has expanded upon that information to reveal patterns in their evolutionary trajectories and the gaps that remain between US subject access and Canadian context, values, and priorities. Future steps of this project will include investigating the extent of these gaps, the distortions they create within the infrastructure of Canadian subject access, and the awareness of such a distortion among the scholars who navigate this infrastructure.

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