

Form, Intention, and Indexing: The Liminal and Integrated Conceptions of Work in Knowledge Organization

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Introduction

This paper proposes a dual conception of work in knowledge organization. The first part is a conception of work as liminal, set apart from everyday work. The second is integrated, without separation. This talk is the beginning of a larger project where we will characterize work in knowledge organization, both as it is set out in our literature (Šauperyl, 2004; Hjørland 2003 Wilson, 1968), and in a philosophical argument for its fundamental importance in the activities of society (Shera, 1972; Zandonade, 2004).

But in order to do this, we will co-opt the conception of liminality from the anthropology of religion (Turner, 1967), and Zen Buddhist conceptions of moral action, intention, and integration (Harvey, 2000 and cf., Harada, S., 2008).

The goal for this talk is to identify the acts repeated (form) and the purpose of those acts (intention), in knowledge organization, with specific regard to thresholds (liminal points) of intention present in those acts.

We can then ask the questions: Where is intention in knowledge organization liminal and where is it integrated? What are the limits of knowledge organization work when considered at a foundational level of the intention labor practices? Answering such questions, in this context, allows us to reconsider the assumptions we have about knowledge organization work and its increasingly important role in society. As a consequence, we can consider the limits of classification research if we see the foundations of knowledge organization work when we see forms and intentions. I must also say that incorporating Zen Buddhist philosophy into knowledge organization research seems like it fits well with ethics and ethical responses the practice of knowledge organization. This is because 20th Century Western interpretations of Zen are often rooted in ethical considerations. This translates easily to work.

As requested, I have tried to show in this paper that we can learn something about the limits of classification research by taking a "post-Western" view of work, practice, and perhaps even structure.

Assumptions

Classification theory operates under some basic assumptions. And though we are probing the limits of classification, this work still operates these assumptions.

First, that what we do when we critique or construct classificatory structures is toward the goal of making classification *better*.

Second, that in all classification that conception of better is operationalized, not necessarily in theory, but in implementation.

Thus, S. R. Ranganathan's operationalization of a better classification scheme was a critique of extant systems on a number of factors (e.g., hospitality and parsimony). This led him, in his theoretical work, to craft more than 600 pages design requirements outlining how to create what he called a dynamic classification scheme (Ranganathan, 1967).

I would just like to pause and make a note here that we know Ranganathan for *faceted classification* not *dynamic classification*, and I think once we hear that dynamism was his goal (being able to account for an ever growing universe of knowledge) that it is quite clear what *better* is in this case. It is a classification scheme that can accommodate new subjects.

I will operate with these assumptions. I am interested in making classification better. And I hope it will be clear to both theorists and non-theorists alike how my *design* recommendations operationalize that desire.

Definitions

Classification has two ideal types: strict and non-strict. (1) Strict classification is mutually exclusive, jointly exhaustive, hierarchical and systematically ordered set of classes. (2) Non-strict is identified concepts and relationship between concepts. Indexing is the identification of significant characteristics in order to represent those characteristics (often using some tool) in an information system (for some users).

In this particular paper, I am most concerned with these acts, though I think my argument and design considerations can be expanded beyond these forms of knowledge organization.

Background

This work on form and intention grows out of much of the work I have done to date, and is influenced by my ongoing interest in ethics in knowledge organization. To date I have been concerned with two major research themes. The first, from my dissertation, is the conception of indexing – both in action and in theory. The second with what I have called, second order classificatory structures. In my dissertation I have examined how theorists describe indexing. What do they talk about? What do they include, and what do they leave out?

This work drew on the sociological conception of metatheory (Ritzer, 1991 a and b), rather than Bates's understanding (2005). What we found was that, when combined, indexing theory is concerned with not only the process by which one analyzes a document and selects a terms to represent that document, but on the

whole, indexing theory was concerned with the purposes, philosophical assumptions, and environment of indexing as well. So when we theorize about indexing, we might be guided by these precedents. Thus, discussion point number one is the idea that we assume many things: process, philosophical position, purpose, and environment of indexing (Tennis, 2005).

This is very relevant for our discussion today because, we are not agreed, both in the theoretical literature, and in the limited amount of empirical literature Šauperl 2005, as to the purpose of indexing.

Taken from Tennis (2005) here are some descriptions of the purpose of indexing:

- Provide Best Textual Means to an End
- Bring Together Knowledge of a Like Kind
- Epistemological Potential for Future Users
- Information Retrieval (pieces of information independent of documentary form)
- Knowledge Organization for Effective Use (as opposed to IR)
- Reflect Essential Rather than Incidental Characteristics of a Document
- Reject what is Not Required and Select What is Usable
- Retrieval of Documents
- Make Use of Recorded Knowledge and Wisdom
- Satisfy Information Need
- To Point to Types of Documents
- Answer Questions

Thus, the concept of intention of indexing, seems up for grabs – to say the least. (Tho' there are at least two types of intention we are concerned with here). As for *form*, that too follows from what we have commonly understood as the core activities of knowledge organization – that is, indexing, classification, and cataloguing.

These activities, when we discuss, let alone teach them, focus on what I call, first order *classificatory* structures. These can be contrasted with second order classificatory structures. The latter can be understood as those structures (and their complementary processes and contexts), that exist *after* a classification scheme or catalogue or index is built and implemented.

For example, when we implement DDC in our catalogues, how do I make sure collocation of subjects persists over time, from one revision to the next? Or... How do I make sure my scheme interoperates (or at least “plays well”) with other systems so I can ship it across the network? Or... How can I understand the purpose, form, and function of my classificatory structure in the context for which it was meant, in contrast to the context(s) in which it might be implemented?

The last in that list allows me to fully understand that the purposes of, for example,

archival metadata might be (and are) different from retrieval metadata.

The middle concept (the interoperability of schemes), presents a fascinating problem related to the structure and semantics of built classificatory structures, and explicitly relates to the concept of intention and also, perhaps implicitly, with my conception of form.

This is because we often assume that the purpose of any indexing language is the same as any other.

As pointed out above, it is not a given, and we can assume that the optimal semantic structure for any one of the purposes of an indexing language will be different, depending on purpose.

Finally, and for me importantly, in second order classificatory structures we can assume that schemes change over time (Tennis, 2002), and if we want to preserve their functionality we have to understand why they were built in the first place, and then observe them change over time.

This background is where I'd like to start to talk about liminality, intention and form.

I want to do this by make a few assertions:

Assertion 1: We carry out knowledge organization work for a purpose

Assertion 2: We carry out knowledge organization work in a context

Assertion 3: We carry out knowledge organization constantly.

Form

When we index or when we classify, we engage in a set of processes. We are very often repeating similar, if not the same, actions.

We make visible our interpretations of concepts, terms, and the relationships that obtain between them. We make visible relationships through various structures, like thesauri and classification. The metaphor is one of ritual.

When Catholics begin to pray they make the sign of the cross.

When Zen Buddhists enter the meditation hall they put their hands together and bow. Both of these make visible the invisible. I have argued elsewhere, that we engage in forms with intention (Tennis, 2010). There I claim that forms were carried out with some intention, ideally to reinforce the design requirements of the system. Of course, this is not always what we do when we index or classify.

But that is the ideal. But when we talk about intention (ideal or otherwise) we, as mentioned above, can distinguish between two types.

Intention

Intention 1 – purpose for why you do something (instrumental)

Intention 2 – reflective knowledge of the action carried out (reflective)

Intention 1 – purpose for why you do something (instrumental)

We are concerned here, specifically with achieving something, and in indexing, for example, we might largely understand

Intention 2 – reflective knowledge of the action carried out (reflective)

This type of intention has to do with the ethos, sentiment, and an appreciation that actions have consequences beyond achieving goals.

An action performed without intending to do that particular action, for example accidentally treading on an insect, without any thought of harming.

If one knows that a certain kind of action is evil, but does it when one is not in full control of oneself, for example when drunk or impassioned.

If one does an evil action when one is unclear or mistaken about the object affected by the action.

An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing, and knows that the action is evil. This is the most obvious kind of wrong action, particularly if it is premeditated.

An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing (as in 4), but does not recognize that one is doing wrong.

Here we can consider ethical questions.

Collocative integrity: Potentials for a semantic violence

What is, collocative integrity? If the purpose of the system is to pull things together how do we make manifest forms with intention? The corollary seems to be that if we deviate we ask ourselves why we deviate from maintaining collocative integrity.

Potential semantic violence: The absurdist logical extension of literary warrant.

Liminality

Liminality is a transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life; such a state occupied during a ritual or rite of passage, characterized by a sense of solidarity between participants.

Anthropology of religion identifies, across traditions, points at which practitioners of religions enter sacred space. The crossing from secular to sacred space is an entry into the liminal, a space apart from everyday or secular life. Crossing a threshold, escaping an everyday conception of work and life, is a liminal conception of work. It changes the participant's intention. Those of us initiated in the arts of indexing and classification appear to operate in a liminal space

Not that what we do in knowledge organization is sacred work, but it is, in intention,

set aside from everyday life. This is evidenced by a number of user studies, studies of cataloguers, domain analysis, and in conceptions of ease of use of indexing languages. If we borrow from these studies the sentiment that those that work in knowledge organization operate in a rarified context, separate from the secular, the everyday.

Coupled with this sentiment, is the assumption that those that work in knowledge organization feel they are engaged in work with a clear intention. Though it is assumed that some people do their work with no intention, (that is, they do knowledge organization work to get a paycheck), the majority have set themselves to a life of work that has a focus.

The upshot of this, to me, is that we invest major intellectual and financial resources (as well as others), what then is the responsibility we have, especially when we conceptualize our work with both form and intention.

So how do we integrate? Do we want to?

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