

The „Regeln für den Schlagwortkatalog“ (RSWK) as a universal German subject indexing language: a semiotic perspective

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The following article is a review of the author's book written in German:

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The world of information is increasingly becoming a global network. All kinds of resources are spread all over the world via internet. Subject indexing offers the users of a bibliographic system, especially the academic users, an indispensable access to the content of these resources. The German Subject Heading Rules "RSWK", as used in the national bibliographies, is the authoritative code of rules regarding subject cataloguing in the German speaking countries – comparable to the "Library of Congress Subject Headings" (LCSH) in the English speaking world. Since its development and implementation – the first edition came at 1986 - it was noted, that the RSWK lacks a theoretical foundation. There was no up to date theory of subject cataloguing in Germany at that time. The RSWK was the first nationwide used code of rules for subject cataloguing. Traditionally German libraries had their individual rules in these matters.

This theoretical lack of the RSWK is reflected in its unsystematical arrangement. The first chapter deals with general rules. It contains regulations that are decisive for the structure of this specific subject heading language. They are followed by chapters that deal with the categories of subject terms established as authority headings in RSWK: personal names, geographical and ethnographical names, topical subject terms, headings that represent the time-aspect of a subject and headings that represent form aspects of a work, characterizing its subject in some way (e. g. its genre, its intended audience, its physical realization). A second part of the RSWK deals with special rules ("Sonderregeln"). Some of them are devoted to subject headings that can be seen as categories of its own (e. g. corporate names, titles of works), others are devoted to the indexing of special types of works: e. g. manuscripts, buildings, movies, music, electronic publications, school books) A main revision of the RSWK came with the third edition at 1998, when the rules, initially developed for card catalogues, were adapted to the modern online environment.

There is no monographic description of the RSWK up to now. This work intends to supply a contribution to such a description by analyzing the indexing language that is shaped by this special cataloguing code as a system of signs. In this endeavor we follow Elaine Svenonius. In her linguistic approach to information organization (Intellectual foundation of information organization, 2000) she calls for a "special purpose linguistics" – I would add and specify: we should follow a semiotic approach and provide an analysis of subject heading languages as sign systems.

I use the semiotics of Charles Morris as instrument of analysis. According to Morris (Foundations of the Theory of Signs, 1938) sign systems and sign processes are to examine in their pragmatological, semantical and syntactical dimensions. The pragmatological dimension of a sign process refers to the relation between the sign and its user, the semantical dimension refers to the relation between the sign and its denotatum, i. e.

those objects to which a sign is applicable, whereas the syntactical dimension refers to the relation of a sign to other signs. The semiotic analysis aims at determining the rules that govern the dimensions of a specific sign system. Human language is such a sign system.

An indexing language is another special sign system. In the sign process of information storage and retrieval at least four actors are involved:

- the author of a document:
- the indexer
- the information specialist
- the end user

The construction of a specific sign system according to Morris follows three steps: at first the determination of the goals of that system, then the principles which are in accordance with these goals and govern the rules and at last the rules themselves.

Two international efforts of information organization are described as instruments for analyzing the RSWK:

- The “Functional requirements for bibliographic records” (FRBR), together with its sisters, the “Functional requirements for authority data” (FRAD) and the “Functional requirements for subject authority data” (FRSAD).
- The “Principles underlying subject heading languages”

Its pragmatical rules characterize the RSWK as a universal subject indexing language, designed to meet the needs of the users of a bibliographical system – i. e. the catalogue of a national library or a union catalogue – in regard to the subject access to the materials that are gathered in libraries. So the RSWK should adhere to the user tasks stated in FRBR and FRSAD. The vocabulary of the RSWK consists of singular terms, which as indexical signs according to Morris denote an individual object, and general terms, which as characterizing signs in Morris’ terminology designate a common attribute of several objects and can so denote these objects. Singular terms and general terms differ in their paradigmatic properties, which is to be observed, when we construct the data model for the entities of the bibliographic universe. From a logical point of view a generic relationship can only be established between general terms.

We suggest that the vocabulary of the RSWK-determined language should be developed dynamically following consequently the principles of user warrant and literary warrant. In a limited range a structural warrant has to be observed to secure the predictability of subject terms. Regarding the dimension of the sign vehicle the vocabulary of subject terms according to the RSWK may have the following form:

- 1) Single word: “Hexe” (witch)
- 2) Precombination of nouns: “Straßenverkehrsrecht” (traffic regulations)
- 3) Precombination of a noun with an adjective: “Medizinische Ethik” (medical ethics)
- 4) Word with a complement to disambiguate homonyms: “Knoten <Mathematik> (Mathematics of knots)
- 5) Phrase: “Diktatur des Proletariats” (dictatorship of the proletariat)
- 6) Precombination of terms: Wagner, Richard / Meistersinger (i. e. the controlled term for this particular musical work)

Except for the first type all others are what we may call precombinations. They all designate one object or concept. The last type has a special form. The RSWK calls it “mehrgliedriges Schlagwort”, a subject term that consists of two or more parts. These

precombinations are used solely as a definite description of an individual object, especially of an event, a work or a material object. These precombinations as definite descriptions are to distinguish from precoordinations as combinations of terms linked in a syntagmatical relation to represent the complex theme of an individual work. For that reason we suggest, that such a “mehrgliedriges Schlagwort” must contain at least one linguistic component that is not part of the controlled vocabulary of the RSWK.

According to the “Principles underlying subject heading languages” and Elaine Svenonius the semantical rules of the RSWK as a subject indexing language have three goals. The rules of the referential semantics are to disambiguate the indexing terms by differentiating homonyms and polysemes. Some rules of the relational semantics deal with the problem of synonyms. By terminological control they establish the subject indexing terms and determine the equivalent terms that may lead the user to the controlled term. Together the subject terms as indexing vocabulary and its equivalent terms as access vocabulary form the vocabulary of the subject heading language.

Other rules of the relational semantics deal with the establishment of hierarchical relationships and coordinate relationships between subject indexing terms. The following relationships are suggested to improve the RSWK: equivalence, generic relation, partitive relation, instance relation, associative relation, a so called “Zugehörigkeitsrelation” as a special type of an associative relationship between a compound subject term (e. g. medical ethics) and the term for its specifying feature (medicine), and the chronological relationship used to indicate a change of geographical names or of the names of corporate bodies.

The rules of the categorical semantics organize the vocabulary under syntactical aspects. They allow the formation of well formed expressions and the transformation of equivalent expressions representing the theme of a document. Categories are intellectual tools to analyze the subject of library materials, to organize these subjects and thus offer subject access to these materials. They represent the entities of the bibliographical universe. They have to be excluding and exhaustive.

The subject categories established in RSWK show a remarkable resemblance to the entities established in FRBR. So we suggest adopting the FRBR entities and to complete the list with the categories of language and ethnic group that have shown indispensable for subject indexing. The terms for persons, families, corporate bodies, works (and its derivatives expressions, manifestations and items), objects, events and places (geographical names) are singular terms, that are proper names or definite descriptions. Concepts are represented by general terms. The terms for the entities ethnic group and language have a special status.

We suggest the following entities and its subject terms:

| Entity | Subject Term | Indikator |
|--------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| Person | Personenschlagwort | p |
| Familie | Familienschlagwort | fm |
| Körperschaft | Körperschaftsschlagwort | k |
| Werk | Titel des Werkes etc. | t |
| Objekt | Gegenstandsschlagwort | o |
| Ereignis | Ereignisschlagwort | h |

| | | |
|---------|-----------------------------|----|
| Ort | Geographisches Schlagwort | g |
| Volk | Ethnographisches Schlagwort | e |
| Sprache | Sprachschlagwort | l |
| Begriff | Begriffsschlagwort | s |
| Zeit | Zeitschlagwort | z |
| Form | Formschlagwort | fo |

In order to characterize the controlled indexing terms we suggest marking them with an indicator. This indicator may also serve for the order of the subject terms in the precoordinate subject heading

According to the “Principles underlying subject heading languages” semantic relationships express the paradigmatic structure of a SHL, whereas the syntagmatic relationships express complex and compound themes. A semantic relationship may be established between terms regardless of their actual use in indexing. Semantical relationships are recorded in subject authority records and thus offer the user a tool for navigating in the bibliographical universe.

Syntagmatic relationships are produced in the process of indexing as warranted by the specific document. The syntactical rules of the RSWK link the controlled subject terms in a fixed order to a chain of terms. Against the actual policy of the rule making cataloguing institutions that aim at minimizing the relevance of syntagmatic relationships we suggest some precisions of these rules. Thereby we follow the principles of declining concreteness of the entities and of orientation to the German natural language.

In a semiotic perspective these rules deal with the formation of subject headings as links of signs with a syntactical structure. They are augmented by rules of transformation by which the sequence of subject terms is altered - again according to the German natural language and without a change of its meaning. These chains of subject terms form a separate level of the indexing language ruled by the RSWK. In their suggested form they are precise and well defined descriptions of the contents of documents. They allow the user to browse in an index of subject chains and to discover the various syntagmatic relationships in which a subject term is used to describe the subjects of documents in the library system. It is another tool for navigating in the bibliographical universe.

Exempel:

p.Keynes, John Maynard ; g.Großbritannien ; s.Wirtschaftspolitik ; z.Geschichte 1918-1945 ; fo.Aufsatzsammlung

Following Brigitte Endres-Niggemeyer (Summarizing information, 1998) we see the process of subject analysis and indexing as a process of summarization. The theme, represented by a precoordinate subject heading is the top macroproposition of a document, a minimal abstract. If a text cannot be summarized to one top macroproposition there may be identified two or more themes. So we may characterize the RSWK as a synthetic precoordinate subject heading language, with its three linguistic levels:

- The indexing term as the lexical representation of a single bibliographic entity
- The whole subject heading, a compound of one or more indexing terms, representing the theme, or a theme of a work

- The ensemble of subject headings indexed for a work, representing the complete subject of the work, which may comprise of one or more themes.

In accordance with this analysis and the “Principles underlying subject heading languages” we suggest some indexing rules. Every entity that is relevant for a theme should be represented in the subject heading by its proper subject term following a standard citation order. Some very concrete entities (especially events, works, objects and corporate bodies) should be indexed not only with their controlled singular term but also with a chain of subject terms which together describe the entity. At least one subject term should be a general term. This rule aims at integrating that concrete entity into the semantic network of the bibliographical database.

The last three chapters deal with special categories of indexing terms, representing the bibliographic entities corporate body, event and work.