Babel, babble and info-speak: could an encyclopedia help?

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Have you ever felt your heart sink in a committee meeting, when someone has raised the question of definitions and the whole table has succumbed to an interminable exercising of hobby-horses? "Keyword", "Information", "Subject", "Taxonomy", "Index", etc; any of the terminology essential to our own specialist area seems capable of stirring up passions, controversy, and unending confusion. Even though the same may happen in other domains, it feels especially ironic that the profession that urges disciplined management of information should so struggle to standardise its own terminology.

Plenty of us have tried to address the problem by publishing definitions, sometimes whole glossaries. If only everyone else would read them, and use them consistently! One recent effort is *ISO 5127:2017*, "*Information and documentation -- Foundation and vocabulary*" published this May. According to the advertising blurb, this international standard "*provides a concept system and general vocabulary for the field of documentation within the whole information field. It has been created with a balanced representation of major work areas in mind: documentation, libraries, archives, media, museums, records management, conservation as well as legal aspects of documentation*." Priced by BSI at £386 (where it is branded *BS ISO 5127*), one wonders how many sales there will be in the UK. That said, if I understand the website correctly one can buy it direct from ISO for just CHF 38.00.

For some years ISKO (international Society for Knowledge Organization) has had an aspiration of producing a more specialised glossary, but latterly this hope has been displaced by a more active project of publishing an online encyclopedia – the ISKO Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization (IEKO) – to be freely available to members and non-members alike. This ambitious reference work is already taking shape at http://www.isko.org/cyclo/index.html.

An introduction on the web page makes it clear this is a scholarly endeavour:

> "This is an online, open access encyclopedia of knowledge organization hosted by ISKO and produced by ISKO Scientific Advisory Council. It will contain entries about concepts, disciplines, organizations, systems, standards, and theories etc. including important domain specific systems.

> "The encyclopedia is peer reviewed, all articles are signed by author(s), dated and versioned (new versions may be distinguished as, for example, Version 1.1 for minor changes of version 1 and Version 2 for major changes). We try to get articles by the best experts in the subject of each article and to maintain a high scholarly standard. The first accepted version of each article is also published in a section of Knowledge Organization: Reviews of concepts in knowledge organization. A version is also archived in WebCite."

The plan is eventually to cover the whole field of Knowledge Organization, from classical concepts and systems to up-to-date advanced technologies, concepts and issues. The prospect is of a very useful reference source for CIG members. Plainly it will take a while to commission articles on so many topics and peer-review them all. But at least 20 authors are hard at work, and already first versions of the following entries are in place:

BISAC Subject Headings List

Classification

Colon Classification (CC)

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)

Domain analysis

Integrative levels

Knowledge organization (KO)

Knowledge organization system (KOS)

Literary warrant

Logical division

Mathematical theory of classification

Reader-interest classifications

Subject (of documents)

Thesaurus (for information retrieval)

The articles vary in length. As a contributor myself, I found it a challenge to work out the right breadth and depth for a topic. I felt reasonably pleased with the first draft I submitted (6250 words, or 8,000 including the references). It's readable, helpful, with a coherent structure, I flattered myself. But then the referees came back (like Oliver Twist) asking for more. The version that the editors eventually agreed to accept has over 13,000 words, and I doubt if anyone could bear to read it at a single sitting. Some of the logical structure has gone fuzzy too. But maybe an encyclopedia article is for reference, not for easy-reading? Maybe a convoluted thread of discussion is OK, if you insert plenty of hyperlinks between the sections? Or maybe there will be requests for a revised update? Or might another author be inspired to do better? The digital medium does offer scope for innovative approaches.

That raises the question of how best IEKO should reflect the technological opportunities of the Internet, and the social networking expectations of today's wired audiences. With so few articles up there, the extent of cross-linkage is currently fairly limited, but in time I guess there is scope for more interactive capabilities. One difference from Wikipedia is immediately clear: no chance of another writer coming in and enhancing (or wrecking) the original author's work! But could there be a less intrusive way for readers to attach comments to articles and generate a discussion? We shall see what emerges.

I began this news piece with a groan about the way our profession disciplines its own terminology. I'm not sure IEKO will put an end to the debates. But at least it should provide some enlightening fuel for them.