5-28-2019

Words and Worldviews: Decolonizing Description

F. Tim Knight

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/librarians

Part of the Cataloging and Metadata Commons
Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.
Words and Worldviews: Decolonizing Description

“... the challenge is to use one culture’s words to describe another culture’s concepts; if we lack the concept it is unlikely we have fashioned the words necessary to convey it accurately.”

Rupert Ross, Dancing With a Ghost.

F. Tim Knight
Associate Librarian
Osgoode Hall Law School Library, York University
I’ve had the privilege and opportunity to be a guest on the lands of many indigenous people, however, I’ve lived and worked for most of my life in Toronto. This area is also known as Tkaronto which has been taken care of by the Anishinabek Nation (especially the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation), the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat, and the Métis. This territory is subject to the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement that directs us all to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.
Today I’m happy to be in Edmonton and I acknowledge that we are on Treaty 6 territory the homelands of the Cree, Metis, Plains Cree, Tsuu T’ina and the Niitsítapiis-stahkoií. Thank you.
What exactly does it mean to ‘decolonize’ description?

First of all by ‘description’ I’m referring here to bibliographic description and more specifically to library classification schemes, subject headings and controlled vocabularies. And, as useful as these systems of organization have been, they have not been particularly kind to many so-called marginalized groups.
In reference to the Library of Congress Subject Headings, the radical cataloguer Sandford Berman once put it this way: “Western chauvinism permeates the scheme.”

As a member of the Red Team on the CFLA Indigenous Matters Committee I set out to explore this idea of ‘decolonizing description.’

For more information see http://cfla-fcab.ca/en/about/committees/indigenous_matters_committee.
In an article about providing subject access to indigenous knowledge by Heather Moulaison Sandy and Jenny Bossaller, I remembered reading that our information systems “fail to provide access to indigenous or traditional knowledge from the point of view of the people whose ideas are being represented.”

If this was the problem then I imagined that the process would be relatively straightforward.

Identify

First, identify outdated and potentially offensive terms like the subject heading ‘Indians of North America’ ...
... and then replace it with a more culturally acceptable term like ‘Indigenous peoples.’ So that’s the path that I initially started out on and, in a certain respect, it’s the path that I am still on.

However, as my research progressed, I began to realize that decolonizing description would require more than just deciding which term might be more appropriate than another. It goes much deeper than that. Our Euro-Canadian or Western view of the world is fundamentally different from the way that many indigenous peoples relate to the world. I will consider some of these cultural differences and how they might affect our approach to information organization.
In 2000, Leroy Little Bear, a member of the Blood tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy and a professor at the University of Lethbridge, spoke about these cultural differences in his paper, “Jagged Worldviews Colliding”:

“Culture comprises a society’s philosophy about the nature of reality, the values that flow from this philosophy, and the social customs that embody these values. Any individual within a culture is going to have his or her own personal interpretation of the collective cultural code; however, the individual’s worldview has its roots in the culture—that is, in the society’s shared philosophy, values, and customs. If we are to understand why Aboriginal and Eurocentric worldviews clash, we need to understand how the philosophy, values, and customs of Aboriginal cultures differ from those of Eurocentric cultures.”

It's important to understand that your worldview is something that not only shapes the way you think about and perceive the world, it’s also something so ingrained and natural to you that you are generally unaware that it affects and colours the way you relate to the world. As University of Manitoba professor Michael Anthony Hart wrote in 2010, worldviews are “usually unconsciously and uncritically taken for granted as the way things are.”

Library and Information Studies professor, Hope Olson, connected classification schemes to culture in her paper, “Cultural Discourses of Classification,” saying that “our notion of classification is a constructed one growing from our cultural heritage.”

Olson identified three “fundamental characteristics” of Western classification schemes: mutual exclusivity, teleology, and hierarchy.
She traces the development of these characteristics back to the philosophy of Aristotle:

“Aristotle,” she says, “is often cited as having developed the origins of classification as we know it. Although he drew on his predecessors to develop the basic notion of classification we still use, he is the one who synthesized their work into something that could be passed through generations.”

_____________________________
Olson, p. 109.
The “predecessors” she is referring to here included the work of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Parmenides of Elea who established the concept of binary existence, essentially: “What is, is and What is not, is not.” Aristotle combined this idea with Plato’s dialectical approach which presents a linear progression of ideas that attempts to resolve two opposing and mutually exclusive views. This teleological method is a “logical and inescapable line of argument” that leads to truth.

Olson, p. 109.
All humans are mortal
Socrates is human
therefore
Socrates is mortal

Aristotle

Aristotle, Olson says, then added his idea of a logical syllogism to this dialectical process of reasoning. The classic example of a logical syllogism being: “All humans are mortal, Socrates is human, therefore, Socrates is mortal.” The syllogism's three levels move from the individual to the universal, or, in other words, it’s a logic that provides a “hierarchical relationship ... that gives prominence to the universal.”

Let’s step aside from these philosophical musings for a moment and consider an example.

_____________________________
Olson, p. 110.
For a concept to be mutually exclusive it means there will only be one place for it to appear in a classification scheme. This contributes to the goal of a classification scheme to provide a set of clear, well defined concepts so that it’s easier for us to differentiate between them. This also helps foster a consistent application of concepts during the cataloguing process and hopefully reduces potential confusion for users navigating through the system.
In the Library of Congress Subject Headings, for example, we have the preferred term ‘Indigenous children.’ A preferred term means that in LCSH ‘Indigenous children’ is the term used for ‘Aboriginal children’ or ‘Native children.’ Therefore, if you’re classifying something that is talking about some aspect of ‘Aboriginal children’ you would place it exclusively under the heading ‘Indigenous children.’ Or, if you happened to be looking for resources on ‘Native children’ the system would prompt you to use the term ‘Indigenous children.’

Having only one place for a subject, along with the idea of having a consistent, universal approach to information organization, is a feature of our classification systems. It’s how we’ve organized and accessed things in our libraries for many years.
However, in an article about classification theory and database design, Jeffrey Parsons notes that this view assumes that concepts can be both clearly defined and that concepts exist independent of human perception. It’s this “classical view,” he says, that “has been shown to be inadequate to account for many concepts that have vague or indeterminate boundaries … [which can mean that] different people (or the same person at different times) may organize knowledge about things according to a different set of classes or categories.”

Olson also notes the following limitation with this approach of mutual exclusivity:

“In classifications we try to find one place for any given topic so that all works on that topic will be grouped together. However, in trying to establish a universally applicable ordering we fail, because topics can be combined according to an enormous range of criteria and to impose universality we must choose one—even though which one we choose may change over time as documented by Foucault.”

So while Parsons, contends that vague concepts make it difficult for us to draw the necessary firm conceptual boundaries, Olson adds that choosing the most appropriate terms is also difficult because there are many ways that a topic might be perceived by an individual over time. This approach can be dangerous too because, while we end up using many ambiguous terms, we are given the “mistaken sense that we have snared reality in our definitions.”

Olson, p. 118.
That thought is Doris Schoenhoff’s from her 1993 book on the challenges of introducing expert systems into Third World countries. Her primary concern, and I’ll come back to this later, was the interface between computers and indigenous knowledge systems. But here she expands on the problem that emerges when we compare concepts to reality.

“When put up against reality, all our distinctions and definitions begin to slip and slide. Concepts and definitions both facilitate and limit our understanding. As the tension becomes too great between the reality and the conceptualization, we cast a net for new terms, new definitions. Often this is just an exchange of one set of limitations for another. I will be working within just such limitations as well. The Western mind typically approaches reality in terms of defined.”

Which takes me back to my earlier idea that the process of decolonizing description would simply involve the substitution of one term for another. Which, although a good first step, doesn’t change the underlying problem with a system that does not reflect indigenous worldviews.

Schoenhoff, p. 39.
A key part of any culture is of course language. Language not only provides us with a means of communication, it also expresses the values of society and codifies how a culture thinks. For example, for some indigenous peoples it may be difficult to establish strong boundaries between concepts because their languages embrace a different worldview.
Little Bear talks about this:

“The languages of Aboriginal peoples allow for the transcendence of boundaries. For example, the categorizing process in many Aboriginal languages does not make use of the dichotomies either/or, black/white, saint/sinner. There is no animate/inanimate dichotomy. Everything is more or less animate. Consequently, Aboriginal languages allow for talking to trees and rocks, an allowance not accorded in English. If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations.”

Little Bear, p. 78.
This perspective was also expressed by recent Juno Award winner Jeremy Dutcher. Dutcher is a tenor and composer and a member of the Wolastoqiyik Nation. He touched on this perspective in an interview on the CBC radio program Unreserved:

“And hidden in those languages is how we are to relate to each other, it’s how we are relate to the Earth around us. You know for example, you know I might be walking down the street with a non-Indigenous person and they say, “Oh, look at those trees over there aren’t those beautiful?” I would say, ‘Yes, abizieg the tree people.’ -ieg is actually the suffix in Wolastoqiyik as well, it’s the people. So these are my relatives. And I fundamentally treat them differently if I see them as kin than I do if they’re just trees, if the life is taken out of them, if they are just inanimate objects. You know we don’t have gender in our language structure, which has a couple of implications, first of all, … but instead of signifying things by gender like the French would do, or the Italian would do, things are animate or inanimate, alive or not. And, abizieg, those are people, those are our relatives.” [spelling of Wolastoqiyik is speculative]

While our culture tends to prefers well defined categories indigenous worldviews are focussed less on boundaries between concepts and more on an awareness of
the totality and the connections that exist between all things as part of the whole.

Unreserved, March 15, 2019.
The linguist and teacher Michael Christie has worked with the Yolngu in the Northern Territory of Australia for a long time. He talks about trying to organize their language hierarchically beginning with the “natural” distinction between plants and animals. He learned that there is no Yolngu word for ‘plant’ or ‘animal.’ “In fact,” he says,

“... there are very few names at all which divide the world up into the sorts of macro categories which English speakers imagine are really real—a difficult fact to account for if we believe that the world is obviously and inherently structured, that hierarchy is a reality independent of human reasoning so obvious to any eye that all languages spoken by intelligent people could reasonably be expected to encode it.”

Imagine an individual entering a library or acting on an information need who is uncertain about how to navigate through the library classification structure. This process will naturally be less challenging for someone who grew up in the culture that generated the classification scheme. But for anyone whose experience lies outside of that society, someone who may not distinguish between the natural categories of ‘plants’ and ‘animals,’ for example, finding an appropriate path may not be so easily accomplished. And, as Olson suggests, the system may even appear to be “hostile to those who see the world in a more fluid and less rigid manner.”

___________________________
Olson, p. 119.
Little Bear tapped into this sense of fluidity when he described the “constant motion or flux” that is an inherent part of living on this Earth. He also suggested that we should all have the “strength to be tolerant of the beauty of cognitive diversity.”

---

Little Bear, p. 79.
Little Bear, p. 80.
This idea of the “beauty of cognitive diversity” is very appealing to me. It reminds me of the earlier comment from Jeffrey Parsons about the challenge of conceptual vagueness and how concepts can mean different things to different people, including the same person, at different times. And it also brings me back to David Weinberger’s idea that “everything is miscellaneous” which I will return to in a moment.

In contrast to the Western notion of individualism and linear progress Olson refers us to the “circle of being,” considered to be a central metaphor for many First Nation cultures and one that does not incorporate mutual exclusivity. Instead, indigenous worldviews are often more inclusive as seen, for example, when Little Bear talked about everything having spirit and knowledge or Dutcher’s example of recognizing that trees are our relatives.

In Olson’s description of the “circle of being” she talked about this kind of integration:

“All people, all plants and animals, all natural phenomena are integral and inseparable elements of the circle of being. The role of each is as a part of the whole rather than as an autonomous individual.”

___________________________
Olson, p. 114.
She illustrated this idea using the example of the “talking circle” which is one way that First Nations communities get together to discuss things. This practice is also a good example of Little Bear’s observations on life’s fluctuations and cognitive diversity.

Sitting in a circle each person contributes to the discussion speaking one at a time. There is no pre-defined topic list so each speaker can comment on a previous point or introduce a new topic. This can mean that many topics will be discussed at the same time. Unlike the meetings we might be used to, the talking circle generates a much more organic discussion that becomes, as Olson described, “a weaving of many inseparable strands” rather than a logical sequence of topics to be discussed.

____________________________________
Olson, p. 115.
Note: Waiting for permission to use this image.
This emphasis on logic, Olson says,

“... is an example of a broader idea that mind is separable from body and reason from emotion. ... we generally consider ‘contradictions, deviations, and overlappings’ as failings showing a lack of logic. Logic as the product of a reasoning mind is highly valued in our dominant culture. However, the exclusion of emotion, or, indeed, of what our bodies can tell us, is not a universal cultural characteristic.”

________________________
Olson, p. 115.
Schoenoff also comments on the cultural aspect of logic in her writing:

“Logic in modern Western culture is a specific form of reasoning that is constrained by rules of combination and consistency. It is abstract and is not directly linked to any human activity. No matter how impressive its techniques or implementations, it is ... culturally biased.”

If we can learn to understand that our worldview is not a universal view then we can start considering creating information systems that recognize and accommodate these differences in perspective.

__________________________

Schoenhoff, p. 140.
Writing as an MLIS student Amanda Stevens expresses our role as information professionals well in her paper, “A Different Way of Knowing”:

“Libraries and information professionals can play an important role in providing resources and expertise in collection, organization, storage and retrieval of indigenous information if they are willing to challenge prevalent assumptions about knowledge.”

One place to begin is by shifting our thinking away from “literary warrant” as the primary means to seed our classification efforts. Literary warrant is problematic because it is a document based approach based on written knowledge and therefore not necessarily a good fit for oral knowledge traditions. And, because literary warrant draws primarily from resources published in the dominant culture it can, as Sandy and Bossaller correctly point out, also lead to the “marginalization of certain cultures.”

In their paper they considered a few other kinds of warrant including “user warrant,” and even more specifically, ...
... “indigenous warrant,” an idea they pulled from the paper, “Indigenization of Knowledge Organization at the Xwi7xwa Library,” written by Ann Doyle, Kim Lawson, and Sarah Dupont. Sandy and Bossaller summarize indigenous warrant like this:

“... terms and potentially classification structures are derived from the worldview of the indigenous peoples themselves, not from the dominant cultures who write about them or who search for information about them.”

Working with indigenous communities is key to creating a system that supports, represents and respects indigenous knowledges and worldviews.

Sandy and Bossaller, p. 133.
I mentioned David Weinberger a moment ago and this will not be the first time that I have used this particular quote in a presentation:

“What you really want is a [classification] tree that arranges itself according to your way of thinking, letting you sort first by expertise and then by experience, and then tomorrow lets you just as easily sort first by language and then by cost, location, and expertise. You want a faceted classification system that dynamically constructs a browsable, branching tree that exactly meets your immediate needs.”

The dynamic browsability that Weinberger points to here, and a system that can adjust to your changing information needs, is something that has resonated in my mind for quite some time.

_____________________

Weinberger, p. 78.
Our current library information systems are anything but dynamic. Sure, you’ll find facets to help you fine tune and narrow your catalogue searches, but they are always the same facets drawn from the same flawed and essentially immovable classification system. Our approach could be different.
Consider this comment from Sandy and Bossaller:

“The rigidity of information systems, which was necessary in the card catalog and even in electronic surrogates for the card catalog, could be reconsidered in light of both the recognized needs for cultural autonomy for indigenous people and the flexibility that is granted by newer web technologies, such as linked data.”

Linked data is the perfect tool to serve up “miscellaneous” information in ways that are not only relevant to the needs of the moment but can also present things, as Sandy and Bossaller describe, in a “cognitively just” way.

Sandy and Bossaller, p. 132.
However, we have a problem. Technology, like classification, is also a cultural product. Schoenhoff described this well when she said that technology has largely been,

“... conceived in Western universities and laboratories. All technology, in some ways, reorganizes time, work, social attitudes, relationships, and authority around the cultural values of the environment in which the technology was developed. In doing so, it sometimes fragments the community.”

Remember too that this comment was written in 1993 when the internet was very young and social media was years away. From today’s perspective, in spite of the illusion of connectivity, we can see how fragmented our society is becoming.

Schoenhoff, p. 97.
Christie offered the following caution in a paper he wrote in 2004 about Aboriginal knowledge and databases:

“Databases are not innocent objects. They carry within them particular culturally and historically contingent assumptions about the nature of the world, and the nature of knowledge; what it is, and how it can be preserved and renewed.”

This sounds like a familiar refrain.

Linked data is not a database. It provides a much more flexible way of connecting data elements and can perhaps do a better job of capturing the context of information as it is organized and sought.

We traditionally think of an interface as something that connects humans to the functions available in a computer. But in the library context our classification schemes act as the interface that connects library users to the information they seek. However, if you are not a member of the dominant culture that interface can become a barrier that frustrates the way that people connect with information. In that sense, perhaps what we really need is a cultural interface.

Can linked data be used in this way? More research needs to be done but I believe that the inherent flexibility available in linked data could be used to bring the miscellaneous to everyone and build better and more inclusive information systems.
Thank you for your attention!

F. Tim Knight
tknight@osgoode.yorku.ca
twitter: @freemoth
Works Cited


Works Cited


Picture Credits
Slide 12: jerseybarb85  https://flic.kr/p/yVf45
Slide 23: Internet Archive Book Images  https://flic.kr/p/owj4Ei
Slide 25: https://jeremydutcher.com/
Slide 29: Internet Archive Book Images  https://flic.kr/p/of1f2M
Slide 30: Bernard Spragg. NZ  https://flic.kr/p/hYaqwP
Slide 31:  https://2eyedhealth.wordpress.com/2014/11/27/talking-circle-sharing-circle/
Slide 35: Allo Bonjour  https://flic.kr/p/T1NxFF  (literary warrant background pic)