our colleagues who index these subjects would let us know their views and practices.

Select list of books


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*We thank the Editor of the British medical journal for permission to quote this extract from Hawkins, C. (1984) What’s new in the new editions, BMJ, 289, 1128 (27 October).

Alternatives to alphabetical order

A member recently purchased a Malay/English ‘Mini dictionary’ published by Ram Book Distributors of Kuala Lumpur (no date given); 9 cm high, $2.90. Its compiler, Haji Abdul Musa, writes in its preface: ‘Although no student should be without a dictionary yet, in my course of teaching career, I had often come across students who did not possess one. Their main complaint being that the dictionaries available are expensive and voluminous . . . It is my earnest hope that this MINI DICTIONARY be a constant companion to every student. It has been aptly sized so as to enable every student to carry it along with him. It can fit easily into a pocket.’ (9 cm high, but 3 cm thick.)

Pages 1–198 starting from the brown-covered end give English-Malay vocabulary. From the bright pink-covered end, pages 1–260 are Malay-English vocabulary, followed by 3 pages of advertisements for books (including one for ‘The most popular book of knowledge available’, which is Essential knowledge—well, it would be); 18 pages of Malaysian idioms, numbered 1–123 but not translated; then pages 279–321 are various lists: offices, organizations, diseases, human relationship, numeral [sic] coefficients, etc.

The point of interest in these lists is the order of the terms. At first this appears to be alphabetical, with then perhaps a random list of items previously overlooked. ‘Vegetables and fruits’ is basically alphabetical, with hiccups. Alphabetical order appears to be attempted though not attained in the list of ‘Days, time and seasons’:

A.D.
afternoon
autumn
all day

B.C.
bi-monthly
century
daily . . .

‘Parts of the body’ proceeds in only mildly startling fashion from

ankle
arm
armpit
beard
brain . . .
to ‘tooth’ (except for ‘thumb’ between ‘finger’ and ‘forehead’, and we must admit a logical connection there). But thereafter it takes off into—what? Pure surrealism? Can any reader suggest what principle may underlie this order?

tooth
body
head
tears
neck
palm . . .

—or this, from ‘Human relationship’:

wife
younger brother
great-grandchild
husband
illegitimate child
mother
nephew
niece
parents
relatives . . .

(The answer is not the alphabetical order of Malay terms.) Perhaps we should admit a new order of entry in addition to alphabetical, chronological and logical: that in which items occur to the compiler. Then seek to follow their mental processes . . .

H. K. B.