Indexing and linguistics

Occasionally in professional reading one comes across an item which is not only a good read but also stimulates thought about possible lines of further inquiry. Such an article is David Crystal’s ‘Linguistics and indexing’ (The Indexer 14 (1) April 1984, 3-7).

The author is Professor of Linguistic Science at the University of Reading, and a prolific broadcaster and author who indexes his own books. Now he has compiled the index to Randolph Quirk’s massive tome, A grammar of English, (Longman, 1985). We hope to publish an account of Professor Crystal’s labour on this in a future issue of The Indexer.

To a linguist, an index is a ‘restricted language’, like for example Religious English or Legal English or even the spoken language of BBC weather reports. Such varieties of language are subjected to linguistic analysis and investigation and, in Professor Crystal’s view, it is desirable that indexes should be similarly examined. There is a difference between intuitively ‘knowing’ a language and ‘consciously’ ‘Knowing about’ a language. Is there a corpus of conscious, explicit knowledge about indexes? If there were, this would form the basis of a ‘grammar’ of the subject.

In order to compile such a grammar, certain investigations need to be carried out. What constitutes a good or bad index? Indexers will recognize a good or a bad index, and there is some consensus among professionals on the matter. However, the views of index users need to be investigated in order to get a complete picture. Experiments need to be designed which will assess the reactions of index users. Perhaps something along the lines of the work of the Centre for Catalogue Research at the University of Bath into the design and performance of various forms of computer-produced catalogues and indexes (most recently described by Philip Bryant in the issue of Visible Language reviewed in this journal—see page 279).

Professor Crystal suggests experimenting with slightly differing variations of index entries to test users’ reactions. Would users automatically rank as less desirable the kind of entries frowned upon by professionals? User reactions to the actual shape of indexes could be sought at the same time; and the main features of such index design have been described by Nan Ridehalgh (‘The design of indexes’, The Indexer 14 (3) April 1985, 165-74). However, as Professor Crystal points out, a constraint on the validity of such experiments is the limitations imposed on most indexes by publishers’ budgets and insensitivities.

A further difficulty in the way of measuring the ‘goodness’ of an index is the varied perspectives of different users. There is a similar difficulty with ‘information’: each user’s existing knowledge patterns and paradigms colour his perception of its usefulness.

However, although there are difficulties in such experiments, they should be attempted, and linguists and indexers can fruitfully co-operate in such enterprises with the object of producing a linguistic theory of indexing language. I have to admit that after attempting to get to grips with some of the linguistic contributions to information science, I have had to retire baffled by the convoluted language. I am sure this will not be the case with indexing and linguistics, particularly when there are authors of the lucidity and conciseness of Professor Crystal.

Tom Norton
Forthcoming conferences


The tenth Cranfield Conference will be held 22–25 July 1986 at the Cranfield Institute of Technology, near Bedford, England. The main interest will be in new developments, recent and continuing research and the potential and problems of the latest techniques and will refer specifically to IKBS and expert systems in indexing and IR, electronic publishing, user requirements, non-technical barriers to information transfer. Further information available from Cranfield Conference Secretariat, The Institution of Electrical Engineers, Savoy Place, London, WC2R 0BL.

Similar themes are announced for the 43rd FID Conference and Congress, to be held 14–18 September 1986 in Montreal: Information, communications and technology transfer. Further details from Comité local d'organisation, 43e Conférence et Congrès de la FID, C.P. 1144, Succursale Place Desjardins, Montréal, Québec, Canada H5B 1B3.

The 28th NFAIS Conference, entitled 'Innovations in information delivery', is to be held 3–5 March 1986 in Philadelphia. Further information from NFAIS, 112 South Sixteenth Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102, USA.

Official publications

Indexers concerned with official publications may care to note the issue of The Law Librarian 16 (1) 1985 which prints the papers given at the 1984 conference of the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians. The papers deal with aspects of publishing and listing of the official publications of Britain, Ireland, the European Communities, Western Europe, the United States of America, and the United Nations.

African bibliographies

Readers whose interests cover aspects of African life may be interested in an article by Beatrice Solape Bankole, Chief Librarian, Bibliographic Control Division, Library of Nigeria, Lagos, entitled ‘Current national bibliographies of the English-speaking countries of Africa’ in International Cataloguing 14 (1) Jan./Mar. 1985, 5–10. The history, coverage and publication details of thirteen national bibliographies are given, together with information on related topics.

Also available is the publication compiled by the IFLA International Office for UBC Commonwealth national bibliographies: an annotated directory. 2nd rev. ed. London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1982.

Specialized vocabularies

The Gesellschaft für Information und Dokumentation GmbH has been asked by the European Economic Community to prepare an inventory of current thesauri which have appeared in at least one of the official languages of the Community, in any country. The data collected, for a data base on DIANE, will serve to give a choice of appropriate documentary language, avoidance of thesaurus duplication, and standardization of different thesauri in the same subject field. More information from Dr A. Gerstenkorn, GID, Herriotstrasse 5, D-6000 Frankfurt 71, Federal Republic of Germany. (FID News Bulletin 34 (9) Sept. 1984, 67.)

95,000 lives

The Bibliography of biography published this summer by the British Library in 1:48 reduction microfiche lists more than 95,000 biographical and autobiographical works published throughout the world between 1970 and 1984. How can so vast a work be compiled and made available so soon? Quite easily, really. By tagging entries with a subject code in the course of original cataloguing of acquisitions received by the British Library and the Library of Congress using compatible machine-readable cataloguing systems, it is possible subsequently to extract all biographical entries, combine them into a single file and sort by subject, to give the bibliography’s main alphabetical name sequence. Each name is followed by a complete bibliographic citation. The original entries are re-sorted to provide the alphabetical author/title index. The 44 fiches, in a binder, are available from the British Library Bibliographic Services Division Sales and Payments Unit, at £60 + VAT (£75 overseas).

FID’s new President


Change of address

The Special Libraries Association has announced (in its newsletter Specialist 8 (5) May 1985) its impending removal to Washington, to a newly-purchased neo-Georgian house near Dupont Circle, at 1700 18th Street NW, Washington DC. The tentative date for the move into the new office is given as mid-August 1985.

M.P.