Indexing in and for Europe: a user’s perspective

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An overview and evaluation of indexes and indexing services that provide access to European Communities’ (EC) information sources. Argues that there is a need for more cross-references from natural phraseology to a harmonized controlled language; that this controlled vocabulary should be precise, comprehensible, and should not give rise to semantic dispute; and that the EC should provide the lead in European indexing generally. Concludes that the growth of English as a teaching medium in Europe will necessitate more provision of English publications, which in turn may afford opportunities for professional indexers.

Introduction

The perspective presented here is that of a user of EC official information sources—a mass of material emanating daily from the many EC offices—the access to which is provided either by the indexes to publications themselves, where these are indexed, or by indexing services which guide us to articles, reports, and other documents on particular subjects contained in a number of different publications. Although this limits the discussion to a discrete category of publications, it would be expected that the EC, in its task of indexing materials which encompass the whole spectrum of disciplines, would stand as a leader and guide to European indexing generally.

Although fully appreciating the financial constraints of publishers to which indexers are currently subjected, what I, as probably all users of indexes, would still hope for in these indexes is that access to the information is rendered as simple as possible by enabling me to find the information I am looking for through natural language terms, cross-referenced where appropriate to controlled indexing terms. I would also hope that the controlled terms would be the same in different publications so that I could gradually become familiar with them and so save time which would otherwise be lost in chasing cross-references.

To bring about such standardization of vocabulary, however, some organization or body with authority in the field has to take on this responsibility. We might expect this lead to have been taken by professionals in the various information centres of the EC Institutions, but this, historically, does not appear to have been the case.

Instead, each of the EC library and information services has proceeded in its development independent of the others (as have our own UK government libraries) and various systems have evolved based on a number of subject analysis systems—DEWEY, UDC, The OECD Macrothesaurus (Commission Library), ECLAS Thesaurus (Commission Library database), and EUROVOC (European Parliament Library, and the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities in the Documents Catalogues and Indexes of the Official Journal), amongst others. It is only now, with the move to create a single online retrieval system, that the EC Institutions are starting to recognize the need for integration of their information services with the establishment of EUROLIB (European Community and Associated Institutions Library Co-operative Group').

Within the aims of EUROLIB a couple of the major concerns relating to indexing are:

the need to adopt a common thesaurus;

the need to harmonize certain working procedures to avoid duplicating common tasks such as the indexing and cataloguing of Community publications.

EUROVOC

At present, EUROVOC is being favoured as the standard thesaurus for a harmonized vocabulary. This thesaurus has been developed for use since the mid 1980s in indexing the Official Journal and now consists of five volumes and a user guide. It is published in the nine official languages of the EC, with volume 3 providing a multilingual thesaurus of the 5,359 descriptors, but not the non-descriptors, in 10 columns spread over two facing pages. A specialist’s opinion of the pre-1989 EUROVOC in its first three volumes was that you needed to have a good idea of what you wanted to find and the words or phrases the EC favour before being able to make full use of EUROVOC-derived indexes. In EUROVOC’s introduction we are told that non-descriptors, expressing particular national usage, are related to the descriptors which are ‘characterised by their precision and lack of ambiguity’ and given the clear examples:
This is quite satisfactory if we are always directed from the terms of our natural language to the accepted descriptors, but when I was preparing a case study of official documentation on the acceptance of professional qualifications in other Member States two or three years ago, it took quite some time to find the appropriate terms and subsequent documentation, simply because there was no cross-reference from my original search term ‘Qualifications’ to the used term, ‘Diplomas’. Since then the Permutted Thesaurus (Vol 4) has been added to EUROVOC. This has certainly improved it as a search tool, and this volume does direct the user from the above term to the appropriate descriptor.

On the question of the ‘precision’ which EUROVOC boasts, however, I have noticed certain preferred terms whose precision could certainly be disputed. For example, we are instructed for the term PREGNANCY TO USE MOTHERHOOD. Is ‘PREGNANCY’ synonymous with ‘MOTHERHOOD’? There are many who would argue quite vehemently to the contrary.

**European jargon**

To an extent the phraseology has become a problem in itself, and has given rise to such publications as 1992 Eurospeak explained by Stephen Crampton of ‘Consumers in the European Community Group’. In the introduction to Eurospeak explained Stephen Crampton writes:

> Too often new words and phrases are coined for the sheer hell of it, some apparently designed to obscure rather than to explain . . .

> . . . It is well known that this bureaucratic language confuses the public. What is more alarming is that even members of the European Parliament, MPs and civil servants, who are supposed to scrutinise EC proposals on our behalf, are increasingly unable to understand documents put before them. The latest twist is that Commission officials themselves are getting more and more baffled by each other’s outpourings . . .

If the EC Commission officials themselves are in difficulty with their own phraseology, there seems but forlorn hope for us ordinary users of EC indexes!

Before starting to read and study official European information sources, I believed myself to be reasonably conversant with the English language. When working with EC information, however, I find that I need to keep a glossary such as Eurospeak explained to hand to clarify the precise meanings in an EC context. It was a surprise, for example, to discover that the phrase ‘Economically Inactive Persons’ does not mean ‘The Unemployed’ as we understand the term!

There is also the plethora of acronyms to contend with. Anne Ramsay’s EUROJARGON, in its third edition in four years, is evidence of the rapidity of change in this area. As well as explaining the meanings of around 1800 acronyms, EUROJARGON is helpful in giving references, where appropriate, to the related text in official EC documentation.

**Indexing services**

The major access points, however, to this documentation, are the indexing services of which two publications are of particular note: European communities legislation: current status? and European access.

European Communities legislation: current status provides access to a chronological listing of references to EC law in the Official Journal. It has an extensive subject index ‘based on title words and phrases and terms in common usage’ and boasts ‘a comprehensive cross-reference system within the index’. Using this work, however, revealed that the cross-references may well be ‘comprehensive’ with regard to agriculture and fisheries, such as cross-references from ‘maize groats’, ‘white clover seed’ and ‘anchovies’, which reflect the origins of the EEC, but the same detail has not been accorded to industrial products, such as ‘anthracite’ and ‘concrete reinforcement bars’—terms embedded without cross-references in the ECSC (European Coal and Steel Community) section in the index. There appears to be a similar neglect of the breadth of everyday social concerns which EC legislation now encompasses. For example, in trying to find the reference to the document about standardizing signs in hotels in the EC (such as the symbol for open all night), the term ‘Hotels’ was not included in the index even as a cross-reference. Consulting EUROVOC, and finding the Broader Term ‘Tourism’, I was able to track it down under ‘Tourism—Social Policy—Hotels—86/665). The ordinary user, however, should not have to have recourse to a separate thesaurus to use an index—the cross-reference should be there as a matter of course.

**European Access**, the bimonthly specialist indexing service on both official and general European information, I have found to be the most useful EC current awareness tool at present published. In addition to official EC publications, it comprehensively indexes articles in the Financial Times and other newspapers and a wide variety of academic, professional, specialized and general periodicals and monographs are scanned for appropriate items for inclusion. Its subject index, however, is not detailed, and the user must be aware of having to check through the section relating to the broader term, if the narrower sought term is not included in the index. It is also not without problems. In the August 1991 issue, for example, the Directive to prevent money laundering cannot be found by looking up the precise term ‘Money laundering’ which is included in the index. The index term ‘Money laundering’ directs us to a less prominent item in the section—‘Capital movements’ whilst the bibliographic reference to the actual Directive on the prevention of money laundering, however, is included elsewhere in the classification scheme in the ‘Financial services’ section of ‘Service Industries’, but with no direction...
to this from the index term. To the index user, albeit not for
the browser, such subject scatter in the classified sequence
is immaterial so long as the index term is the guide to the
two differently classified items, but in this case it is not.

Bibliographies

Two bibliographies are particularly to be recommended
for discovering EC publications such as those outlined
above. The first, The documentation of the European
Communities: a guide4 is at present the definitive work on
this subject. It not only guides the reader step-by-step
through the complexities of both printed and online EC
documentation and its related indexes, but also, by means
of its own detailed subject index and associated list of
abbreviations, it provides direct access to evaluative com-
ment on the individual information sources.

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preface explains, is confined ‘to basic material, including
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The second, European Communities information,9 as its
preface explains, is confined ‘to basic material, including
bibliographies which will lead to further, more specialized
information and to details of organizations and agencies
which may be able to provide additional help’. It is a slim
30-page booklet, not indexed, but which provides an excel-
ent quick overview.

Conclusion

Over the 1980s great strides have been made in the pro-
vision of access to EC information sources by means of
indexes and indexing services, only a few of which have
been mentioned here. Those discussed, however, have been
shown to be not without their problems. We have only to
attempt to find what in our common parlance is referred to
as the 'Doorstep Selling Directive'—a name bearing no
relation to the actual wording of the title10—to understand
the deficiencies which still obtain in EC indexes. From the
user's point of view, there is scope for improvement in the
indexing of these publications in three respects. Firstly,
there is a particular need for far more cross-references from
natural to controlled and harmonized language; secondly, it
would be useful if explanations of EC jargon words and
phrases used in the texts could be included in a glossary
appended to the index; and, lastly, the terms used should be
precise, comprehensible, and not give rise to semantic dis-
pute.

As we look ahead to the start of the Single Market on 1
January 1993, questions to be addressed are whether a lin-
gua franca will evolve; whether that lingua franca might be
English; and, if so, what opportunities might emerge for
indexers. The Dutch, renowned as linguists, already find it
more profitable to conduct business at home in languages
other than their own.11 In recognition of this, the education
ministry of The Netherlands has pronounced that Dutch
will cease to be the official teaching language in its schools
and institutions of further and higher education and that
these establishments will be free to teach all subjects in the
language of their choice. It seems likely that most of those
which change will opt for English, which is already used
widely in higher education.12 It follows that some new text-
books and other materials in English will be required to
support this change and that these will require efficient
indexes, which will, it is to be hoped, be compiled by pro-
fessional indexers.

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—And to say anozer

At the Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders' 
seminar held during the London Book Fair, ‘Business in 
Europe’ (23 March 1992), Michael Holderness spoke of a 
new dialect there, international English: ungrammatical but 
understood by its communicants. Foreigners may under-
stand each other's translations of English better than 
English-speakers would. Perhaps our linguistic standards 
should be revised for the international market. On electron-
ic networks on the Continent, 'If the grammar is perfect, 
they're probably Dutch!'

☐ Indexing work is not recommended to those who lack 
an orderly mind and a capacity for taking pains. A good 
index is a minor work of art but it is also the product of 
clear thought and meticulous care.

—from How to make money from home by Peter Farrell
(Kogan Page).