ISALLIS: from Termatrex to Internet

Marlene Burger

The article discusses the development of the Index to South African Literature on Library and Information Science, which is the result of a joint research project (1974–80) between the Department of Information Science (University of South Africa) and the Unisa Library. Reflecting the evolution of the available technology, the index that began using optical incidence cards (Termatrex) is currently available on a regularly updated CD-ROM database and will soon be available on the Internet.

In 1974, the Research Centre for Library and Information Service of the Department of Library and Information Science (now Department of Information Science) at the University of South Africa (Unisa), instituted a research project that led to the development of an indexing system for South African literature on library and information science – the Index to South African Literature on Library and Information Science (ISALLIS).

The project and indexing system were intended to serve as a training model for the department's students, to gather information about and expertise in manually indexing a small collection, and to provide a centralized index to the South African literature on library and information science. Control over the project was shared between the department and the Unisa Library. As a member of the library staff, the author was seconded to the department as a researcher. The project, covering the period 1974–80, consisted of four phases:

1. testing available indexing systems, culminating in the choice of a coordinate indexing system;
2. experimentally indexing a sample of the literature, building the thesaurus and punching the Termatrex cards;¹
3. operational indexing of all existing material and the subsequent transfer of the working index to the Unisa Library;
4. maintenance of the index by the inclusion of current material.

The following subject areas were covered:

- library science, including its philosophy, management, education, ethics, and so on;
- information science, including relevant areas of computer science, linguistics, librarianship and communication science;
- reader studies, including psychological, sociological, cultural and related aspects of the reader and the user of informational materials;
- bibliology, including the study of the record and librarianship in their physical, cultural and historical aspects.

During this period, these subjects were taught by most library schools in the country and therefore used as a guideline for the scope of the index. Since then, the information scene has changed, with new subjects emerging and curricula expanding to accommodate them. Thus ISALLIS now has a much broader scope and includes new concepts such as knowledge management and metadata.

The following types of document were included: all South African journals on Library and Information Science, theses, dissertations, monographs, research reports, conference proceedings, motions proposed at conferences of the South African Institute for Librarianship and Information Science, newspaper articles, general periodicals, Fest-schriften, inaugural lectures, and laws. At present electronic media and electronic text, as well as South African articles published in overseas journals, chapters in edited books and individual conference papers are also indexed; i.e. if anything warrants a separate index entry, it will be indexed.

Four indexing systems were examined, including those used in Library Literature and Library and Information Science Abstracts. However, the descriptors used in these indexes could not easily be adapted to South African needs. The other two systems tested were PRECIS (the researcher attended a course presented by Derek Austin) and coordinate indexing. PRECIS proved too costly and complicated for manual indexing and PRECIS computer programs were not available for the computer in use at Unisa during that time. Coordinate indexing was subsequently selected as the most suitable system for the project.

In constructing the thesaurus, the Thesaurus of ERIC descriptors (Educational Resources Information Center, 1974) was used as a terminological guide, but many terms could not be transferred directly from it because of differences in meaning to South African usage. For general standards, the ISO's Documentation – Guidelines for the establishment and development of monolingual thesauri was used (ISO, 1974).

During the research phase of the project, 4000 items were indexed. The thesaurus was developed simultaneously. Descriptors consisted only of terms having literary warrant, with non-descriptors added for reference purposes. Names of persons, libraries, conferences, towns, regions and countries were included as descriptors. To reduce false retrievals, pre-coordinated concepts (e.g. Afrikaans children's literature) were used as descriptors. After 8000 items had been indexed, the thesaurus was computerized, with the computer balancing the terms.
During 1985 the thesaurus was transferred to the Inmagic database system, which enabled the data structure to be designed specifically to suit the library as well as user needs. Previous errors could also easily be rectified and some weeding was done. After the emergence of DB Text (Inmagic), the thesaurus was upgraded. There are now approximately 15,000 indexed items in the database.

Each term refers to a brief bibliographic record with an accompanying abstract. Most of the items are available in the Unisa Library since its policy is to build a collection of all South African library and information science literature. Users can also find items such as the periodicals and monographs indexed through the library catalogue. The index is available on the Unisa campus Library database network on CD-ROM (using the Windows version of DB Text (Inmagic)). It fits in well with this network since other internal subject databases such as the music, education, theological and law indexes are also accessible through the campus network. In the near future ISALLIS will also be on the Internet.

Notes
1. Termatrex cards are optical incidence cards similar to ‘peek-a-boo’, ‘peephole’ or ‘feature cards’.

References
Educational Resources Information Center (1974) Thesaurus of ERIC descriptors, 5th edn.

Marlene Burger is in the Department of Information Science, University of South Africa, PO Box 392, Unisa 0003, South Africa. Email: burgem@unisa.ac.za