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Subject Indexing in Sweden – the creating of a national system based on international standards in a country that often wanted to go its own way

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Abstract

This presentation will provide an overview of how a subject heading language has been implemented in a Swedish context. Swedish libraries used to create their own approaches to subject access - if at all. With the help of IFLA's principles, LCSH and Rameau, a Swedish Subject Heading Language has been created. It was developed in close contact with the National Bibliographic Agency. It has been applied since 2002 and is used by most libraries attached to the Swedish union catalogue LIBRIS. This paper will examine our experiences with regard to both initiating a new system based on internationally accepted rules as well as taking into account the particular circumstances associated with a small country with its own history and experiences. In many ways Sweden has regarded itself as unique in terms of cataloguing and subject access. For instance, Sweden has a classification system of its own. But concerning subject access we are today part of a global context. Our presentation will show how contacts within the IFLA community have been used to bring about a system where the sharing of intellectual efforts benefits the user and how the venture has been accepted by other libraries.

What is “Swedish Subject Headings”?

- Swedish Subject Headings is the name of the first national subject heading language in Sweden used by a large number of libraries.

- It is available as a separate database which is freely available on the Internet at no cost for the user.
- It is also integrated as an authority file in the LIBRIS cataloguing module

Background

The issue of subject headings has a long history in Sweden and especially at the Royal Library, the National Library of Sweden (in charge of the national bibliography). The Royal Library created a very impressive subject heading catalogue in the 1920's with guidelines actually not so much different from those internationally accepted today. At the same time Sweden choose to construct a classification system of its own, Classification System for Swedish Libraries (Klassifikationssystem för svenska bibliotek), instead of following the other Nordic countries who had based their classification either on Dewey or UDC. In the 1950's the National Bibliographic Agency began its card distribution services but unfortunately the interest for subject headings had at this time drastically declined, and this lack of interest went on for many decades.

Union catalogue - but no common subject heading language

It was not until the cataloguing process was computerised that the issue of subject headings was once again on the agenda. The Swedish union catalogue for research libraries (LIBRIS) was created in the 1970's. Each library contributed to the catalogue but again subject headings were not part of the co-operative venture but thought of as a local issue for each library. (The needs of special libraries using lists such as MeSH and Agrivoc is another thing). Some librarians from different libraries within LIBRIS worked hard however to convince others of the importance of subject headings. Reference Librarians in particular understood the value of subject headings as a user friendly way of finding relevant works. So we had dedicated librarians but no controlled vocabulary or thesauri and no instructions on how to create subject headings. In this situation a number of libraries decided to use the subject index to the Classification System for Swedish Libraries as a vocabulary. Among them was The Royal Library. But the lack of guidelines led to endless discussions most every day on how to construct terms – should we say "Psychology – women" or "Women – psychology"? Some efforts were made within LIBRIS to co-ordinate subject cataloguing and a brochure on subject indexing principles was published and seminars and conferences were held.

Contacts with IFLA was vital to our project

The IFLA satellite meeting held in Lisbon in 1993, *Subject Indexing Principles and Practices in the 90's* was a good starting point for something to happen in Sweden. Pia Leth was fortunate to attend this meeting and came home with new ideas. We started to look into LCSH and RAMEAU.

The Division of Bibliographic Development and Co-ordination at the Royal Library started by:

- Studying the Red book and were amazed at the richness of the subject vocabulary.
- Studying the guidelines of RAMEAU and being impressed by its logical structure.
- Reading Lois Mai Chan's book *Library of Congress Subject Headings principles and applications* and finding answers to many of our questions.

The situation towards the end of the 1990's can be summarized as follows:

- Growing interest in subject indexing
- No national subject heading language
- No guidelines
- As subject headings had been considered to be of local interest only, they were registered in fields specific for each library in LIBRIS and each library did it their own way.
- The differences between various libraries and their respective users were often emphasised. The impression being that students in Stockholm and Gothenburg seemed to have very little in common!

A database of subject headings

In 1999 we created an Access database called Swedish Subject Headings. This was made possible as the Royal Library at that time had extra funds we could use. This has not been the case ever again. We seized the opportunity and have been grateful ever since.

The origin to the database was the subject index of the classification system and a list of subject headings used at the Royal Library. We decided that the database should be free of charge for all Internet users.

As the origin was the subject index to the classification system we already had a classification notation linked to each subject heading. We have continued assigning notations to new terms and this is still part of the job when creating new terms.

The Swedish LCSH-project

The uniqueness of Sweden

Here we need to point out to you that the Royal Library has no authority to make rules that other libraries must follow. Decisions have to be reached by consensus. We therefore had to plead our case and convince others of this splendid idea - to create a subject heading language!

The situation in 1999 can be summarized as follows

- We had a database of subject headings
- We came to a decision to follow LCSH and RAMEAU
- A mission for Pia Leth as a member of the Classification and Indexing Section in IFLA to ask Lois Mai Chan to come to Sweden and give lectures (both on this committee)

The project's main objective was to improve subject cataloguing in Sweden and to facilitate and promote co-operation between libraries. We most definitely did not want to create a unique Swedish system. This was never an option although it was proposed to us. We needed international standards and guidelines and our arguments for choosing LCSH as a model was that it would be of great help not only for cataloguers but also for end users, if we could initiate a system based on internationally accepted principles. It would also make it easier to translate subjects headings made by cataloguing agencies in other countries to Swedish subject headings which would save a lot of time and reduce cataloguing costs. The publishing of the LC online catalogue on the Internet had, needless to say, a major impact on our decision.

Our project started as a co-operative venture between three libraries, the Royal Library, Stockholm University Library and Uppsala University Library. In order to get a good start two members of the Royal Library staff visited RAMEAU at Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris for discussions and consultations. We needed to know how to get our priorities right in order to reduce the amount of future mistakes.

The LCSH-project consisted mainly of three parts.

1. Mapping of our subject headings to LCSH.

As most of the subject headings in the database had their origin in the subject index to the Swedish classification system we started by selecting all terms in one of the main classes of the classification system and then finding the corresponding terms in LCSH. We didn't use any sophisticated techniques. The selection from the Access database was converted to Microsoft Word-documents designed as tables where you filled in the information. After a relatively smooth start with subject terms in the field of Philology we went on with Education and Literary history. An extra librarian was assigned our team and worked full time for a few months managing to translate the subject headings in almost all classes in the humanities and some in the social sciences.

The remaining subject headings are currently being translated by the regular staff as part of the work with new subject headings. This means that progress is slow but we do not have the staff resources to do it any other way. Entire areas still remain to be mapped to LCSH. Last autumn three major university libraries, specialising in technology and science, undertook to translate terms in their fields. Unfortunately this came to a halt due to lack of money.

Finding the English equivalent term was in most cases not too difficult a task and exact corresponding terms were found for many subject headings. We didn't have the ambition to make a 100% match between all of the terms. One principle was that the English term must not be narrower in scope than the Swedish heading. Sometimes we had to use two or three LCSH terms for one Swedish term. Subject headings relating to Swedish conditions and phenomena for which there were no English headings were kept in the database without a LCSH equivalent. Those subjects and concepts occurred quite frequently in the classes of Ethnology, History and Law. A local Swedish tradition like *Mårtensfirande* and a local monster like *Storsjöodjuret* are typical examples of where no LCSH-terms could be found.

The Swedish language is full of compound nouns. Many concepts found in LCSH are expressed with the help of subdivisions though in Swedish are expressed with compounds. This will at times make it harder for us to be consequent in applying topic subdivisions. The subdivision Research (in Swedish "Forskning") in LCSH is an example of this. The term Linguistics – Research is expressed as "Språkforskning" in all Swedish dictionaries.

Building hierarchies one of the greatest achievements

Since we practically lacked relations between subject headings in our database we tried to apply the structure of LCSH-terms to our headings. Whenever it was possible we added broader terms and relative terms according to the LCSH system to our own subject headings thereby creating hierarchies in the system. A lot of this work remains to be done but building hierarchies is one of the greatest achievements of our work.

To use an index for a classification system as a base for a subject heading list is not without its problems. The terms are not constructed according to the subject heading system and very often we had to reformulate them so they would match the guidelines. We realized very soon that there had probably been no comprehensive revision of the index since it was first published back in the 1930's. Many terms were obsolete and had to be replaced with modern ones, e.g. concepts for different kinds of social insurances. Other terms referred to concepts for which no documents could be found in LIBRIS, so those terms had to be removed, as we apply the principle of literary warrant. On the other hand, we didn't have to start from scratch but could start with a list of approximately 30 000 subject terms. If this had not been the case, there would not have been any subject heading project.

2. Open lectures and training sessions led by Lois Mai Chan

We were very happy when Lois Mai Chan, professor at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Kentucky and an expert in LCSH, accepted our invitation to come to Stockholm. Lois Mai Chan visited us on two occasions in 2001, the first of these took place in March and the second in October. The first visit lasted a full week, during which she gave open lectures to a large audience (ca 160 people) from many different libraries in the morning and training sessions for a small group of 30 people in the afternoon. Thanks to Lois Mai Chan the lectures were a great success, and many of the questions, lingering from earlier, received answers during that week. The participants felt very enthusiastic and the first week ended with a discussion taking place in the smaller group where it was decided that the Royal Library should make an outline of guidelines for Swedish libraries to be discussed at the October session.

When Lois Mai Chan returned to Stockholm in October there had been time for the participants to practice what they had learned. Another big session for 120 people was arranged and a couple of training sessions for the smaller group. The preliminary version of the Swedish guidelines was discussed and several good remarks were presented to the group. The guidelines were then rewritten and finally accepted by the group by the end of 2001.

The lectures given by Lois Mai Chan were essential to the Swedish project. A large number of librarians from different libraries in Sweden received a high class presentation of the system at the same time, and many of them later begun to use the Swedish Subject Headings.

3. Translation and adaptation of the LCSH:s guidelines for subject headings into Swedish.

Previous to the Paris visit and Lois Mai Chan's lectures, this seemed to be an almost overwhelming task. The *LCSH Subject Cataloging Manual* consists of four volumes with instructions – should we start with page one and work our way through? We got some good advice in France and later, after Louis Mai Chan's Stockholm lectures, we knew how to proceed. Since the principles of subject cataloguing were unfamiliar to most librarians in Sweden we needed basic instructions on how to work, how to construct subject terms, how to analyse a work, how many subject headings should be assigned to a work etc.

When in France we found out that RAMEAU had started with translations of the main lists of LCSH's subdivisions together with the instructions for their applications since these lists are essential and basic in subject cataloguing. On the whole the *Guide d'indexation* published by RAMEAU was a far better starting point for us than LCSH's guidelines since it had a logical

arrangement, a presentation of indexing principles and comprehensive guidelines.

This resulted in a document with guidelines that is based on both the *Subject Cataloging Manual* and the French guidebook. The first version consisted mainly of general principles and very few special instructions. Those have been added subsequently based on the needs of the cataloguers who use Swedish Subject Headings.

Our guidelines sometimes differ from those in the *Subject Cataloging Manual* and those in RAMEAU. The Swedish Subject Headings for instance always use a fixed citation order, Topical term – topical subdivision – geographic subdivision – chronological subdivision – form subdivision. There are no inverted headings at all. Our system does not use geographic topics as main entry as often as the other subject systems but favours geographic subdivisions for most topics. All topics can be subdivided geographically unless an instruction says otherwise. We have good confidence in the judgement of the cataloguers and believe that they will never create a subject heading such as “Nirvana – Sweden”.

The differences are something that cataloguers must remember when translating English or French subject heading in bibliographic records for use in the Swedish catalogues.

The situation today

Nearly all university- and research libraries within LIBRIS as well as the National Bibliographic Agency use Swedish Subject Headings, and the quality of the bibliographic records in LIBRIS is far better than before the project, and is constantly improving. Subject gateways and portals and specialized subject bibliographies are also using Swedish Subject Headings.

Today the team consists of three people working with the Swedish Subject Headings. The work consists mainly of four parts:

1. New subject headings

Establishing new subject headings based on proposals from cataloguers around Sweden. We have a form on our website where you can propose new headings. The staff makes a list of new proposals and sends it to an e-mail list with around 110 recipients. Everyone on the list is welcome to comment on the headings. Once a week there is a meeting with representatives from cataloguing divisions at the Royal Library and the editorial staff where new subject headings are approved. The minutes from these meetings are sent to the e-mail list, and a weekly list with new headings is published on our website. The headings are then added to the database and bibliographic records are corrected in LIBRIS by the editorial staff.

Training

In January 2002 we started to teach subject cataloguing to Swedish librarians. The teaching aspect has been one of our main tasks during 2002 and 2003. The courses mainly follow the outline of Lois Mai Chan's lectures, but we also learned a lot about teaching subject indexing at our visits to Paris and to KABA in Warsaw. In Paris we learned that Poland also was launching a similar project, and visiting them taught us a lot. Now we have regular training sessions at the Royal Library in Stockholm between 10 and 12 times a year. Libraries who want to train all of their staff members often prefer that we visit them for training sessions. So during the past two years we have done a lot of travelling around Sweden. Almost 1 000

people have attended our courses during this time, and last year we have also been able to offer the libraries two courses, one basic and one advanced course.

Reference group meetings

We have regular meetings with representatives from participating libraries where we discuss new rules and guidelines.

4. Maintenance of our website

There is no printed manual for the Swedish Subject Headings. All information is published on our website. There you will find guidelines, lists of subdivisions, the weekly lists, the formula for subject heading proposals, links to useful resources on the web and of course a link to the database. There are pros and cons with this system. Everyone can easily obtain information about the system and everything is free of charge. On the other hand it is not an easy task to present all of the information in an understandable and easy manner, and the navigation is far from intuitive. Some information seems to be better understood in a printed publication e.g. lists of subdivisions. We spend a lot of time on planning and maintaining our website and we even had to consult a professional outside the library to improve the presentation.

Problems and questions

- Our general principle is to follow international standards. But often we find it hard to stick to that principle. Instead we create our own solutions. This balancing act is not always an easy one. For example we have the Swedish subject heading "Spanska inbördeskriget 1936-1939" (Spanish civil war 1936-1939), but in LCSH and RAMEAU this subject heading should be constructed as Spain – History - Civil war, 1936-1939. In a case like this we are unwilling to change our term as that implies changing so many records.
- We have problems with the relationship between subject headings and classification. We find it hard to explain the differences to librarians who feel a lot of extra unnecessary work is being done.
- We want to find a way to handle the fact that very often a new subject heading (that we put a lot of work on preparing) is used just once for this single work and never again!
- The cultural differences can be a challenge, especially concerning political life, cultural life and religion. It would be impossible for us to make a see reference from Social democracy to Socialism like LCSH does. In Sweden those concepts are not even near synonyms. We also have many terms for different aspects of the Laplandish culture with no equivalence in LCSH.
- As this project came to life in the age of the web, we have all our guidelines and instructions on the web. Is this good or bad? We have just recently understood that we must have a printed version of the Swedish Subject Headings. Without a printed version some people just seem to assume that it just does not exist!

The future

- What lies ahead of us is to add some other lists of subject headings to our database but they will be tagged as other schemas. There will be lots of genre terms for music and fiction added but we hope that we can get the libraries that use these lists to handle the maintenance themselves in the future.
- We do want a FAST-project of our own for web resources!

Conclusion

Today we take pride in being a small country that has so often in the past found its own solutions to bibliographic issues, to finally merging with the larger international community, at least when it comes to subject headings.

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