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Titles and subject headings: about daily activities in the ASCL library

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Titles and subject headings: about daily activities in the ASCL Library

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Information specialist ASCL Library



The library of the African Studies Centre Leiden has been praised throughout history. The jubilee book on the occasion of 50 years African Studies Centre²¹ speaks of a library and a documentation centre '*die er zijn mogen*' - that stand out. The most recent external evaluation report on the African Studies Centre Leiden, from 2017, says about the library that

it 'provides an unrivalled research resource within the country and one which is within the top few African Studies libraries in the world'. Go figure.

There are indeed a lot of special things to be said about our library and its documentation practices. There's the size and variety of the collection, which, since the early 2000s, has regularly been supplemented by acquisition trips to African countries - such as to Rwanda last year. You could mention the electronic services and products of our library, such as the Alert Service and the web dossiers, or the Wikimedia, Wikipedia and Wikidata activities and applications. You could talk about the personal service provided by our colleagues at the front desk and how nice and special it is that in the ASCL Library much - but not everything - is still on open shelves and that as a visitor you can wander between the shelves and pick out whatever interests you.

21 De Bok, M. (2000). *Leer mij Afrika kennen : vijftig jaar Afrika-Studiecentrum*. Leiden : Afrika-Studiecentrum. <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/18449>

However special and valued all this may be, I did not want to talk about it now, because my colleagues might do so, and also because I would rather tell you something about perhaps the most common activity in our library - and I think in every library: cataloguing!

The craft of cataloguing

What about it? For starters, it is something we all do in one way or another, with the exception only of Jos, the head of our library, and Ella, who, as a front desk clerk, has already experienced almost half of the African Studies Centre's existence.

When cataloguing books and other items, a distinction is made between the so-called formal description and the description of the content of a work. Things like title, author, place of publication, publisher, and year of publication, but also the number of pages of the work, the language or languages in which it was written, even its size in centimeters in case it is a hardcopy book, etc. fall under the heading of formal description.

So, how does this work? One might think that nowadays a lot of information is entered automatically into library catalogues. To a certain extent this is true - I will briefly get back to this later. However, each and every item in our catalogue has, at some point in recent or more distant history, individually been added, and has been edited, at least to some extent, manually. And the same goes for all the other catalogues that can be searched under Leiden collections in the catalogue of the Leiden University Libraries.

Formal description

When we catalogue an item, say a book, we check if a useful formal description of the item is already available in WorldCat - the international catalogue that brings together the holdings of more than 10,000 libraries worldwide. If this is the case, we will import that description and reuse it for making our own catalogue record. Frequently, however, such a description does not yet exist, and we will just make the record ourselves.

The options our cataloguing system provides for describing certain properties are, in some cases, enormous. This is of course mainly an advantage. The fact that we can choose from a list of more than 500 language codes, means that we can not only add *eng*, *fre* or *por* to the catalogue records of items in our collection, but also *som* for books in Somali and *kin* for books in Kinyarwanda.

It is now possible to filter a search result in the library catalogue by these languages as well. Even so, still many more languages exist, in the world and also in Africa, so that codes such as *other Niger-Kordofanian* remain, as well as *none of the above*.

When we add a person's name to the catalogue record of an item, it is mandatory to also add a so-called *relator code*. This code designates the relationship between the name and the work described, such as author or editor. The list of codes to choose from is long. Apart from *author* and *editor*, some 300 roles can be stated, from *abridger*, *actor* and *adaptor*, to *writer of accompanying material*, *writer of added commentary*, *writer of added text*, *writer of introduction*, *writer of lyrics*, *writer of preface* and *writer of supplementary textual content* (there are no roles beginning with x, y or z). This list is a bit dazzling, and it is fair to say that we usually limit ourselves to the persons that have done something that is obligatory to mention: authors and editors, and, depending on the information carrier, a handful of others.

Content description

Whether we import a formal description or create one ourselves, in all cases we add 'content' to the record, and that brings me to the other aspect of cataloguing: the content description, or content metadata. All records in our catalogue have keywords from the African Studies Centre Thesaurus. In addition, we often add other content: a summary, a table of contents, anything to make the item easier to find; and in the past, famously, the self-made abstracts. With regard to the abstracts, let's take a look at our library's history.

For decades, making abstracts of journal articles and books was one of the main tasks, if not *the* main task of the information specialists in our library. The abstracts were published as the *Documentatieblad* (Documentation Journal) from 1968 till 1993 and as the three-monthly journal *African Studies Abstracts* from 1994 till 2002. From 2003 they were published online, as the *African Studies Abstracts Online*. The African Studies Centre was quite famous for these abstracts among Africanists in the world, especially in Africa.

But times changed. More and more often, summaries were supplied together with the articles. Nowadays it is such common practice that journal articles begin (or sometimes end) with a summary, that you would almost forget that, for many journals, this is a fairly recent practice. Moreover, more and more journals make their articles available online. Nowadays, articles are bought

in large packages from international providers, together with their metadata. They are directly made available online and can be searched in the 'All content' part of the Leiden catalogue - not in the institutional catalogues. With these developments, the end of the African Studies Abstracts Online inevitably came: it made no sense to do double work, and in 2017 we pulled the plug. Instead, we now provide a weekly list of recently published electronic articles on the library website.

The African Studies Thesaurus

Another product of the library that I would like to pay some attention to is the thesaurus. To be sure, what is a thesaurus: a thesaurus is a collection of keywords that exhibits some structure: a keyword, or preferred term, is typically related to variant terms - the non-preferred terms, as well as to broader, narrower and/or associated terms. Created in the early 2000s by our former colleagues Marlene van Doorn and Katrien Polman, the ASCL Thesaurus is still a much-valued product that is maintained and supplemented to this day.

In addition to a range of general terms relating to the study of Africa in the fields of the social sciences and the humanities, the thesaurus contains an enormous number of names: names of countries, of course, but also names - and name variants - of ethnic groups and of languages, and, for example, of kingdoms and of wars. The choice of which variant will become (or remain) the preferred term is not always obvious. *Swaziland* has officially become *Eswatini*, that is not difficult (apart perhaps from noticing this change on time). Sometimes objections to a term arise over time and we change the preferred term: *slaves* became *enslaved persons* and *disabled* became *persons with disabilities*. *Superstitions*, as a rather judgmental term, was taken out and replaced by *popular beliefs*. Different stakeholders or other groups may prefer different terms. The preferred term *Biafra Conflict* was at one point changed to *Nigerian-Biafran War*, with *Biafra Conflict*, *Biafra War*, *Nigeria-Biafra War* and *Nigerian Civil War* as variants.

An interesting aspect of the thesaurus is also that it gives some indication of new topics in African Studies, or topics that became increasingly important, so that additional terms in a certain domain became useful. Terms of fairly recent date include *remote working* and of course *Covid-19*, but also *fantasy novels*, *slam poetry*, and *motivational literature*, a term we typically use for popular booklets with all kinds of advice on how to live a virtuous, successful and/or happy life. Other relatively new thesaurus terms reflecting

newer topics in African Studies are *misinformation, plagiarism, customer orientation, bodily integrity, right to privacy, victim support, whistleblowing, cybercrime, cybersecurity, wind energy, geothermal energy, animal rights and human-animal relationships*. Last week, *snakes*, which until then had to make do with the term *reptiles*, finally got their own thesaurus term.

Which terms you create and when, which variant you choose as the preferred term and which terms you relate to each other are matters always open to discussion. The ultimate goal of thesaurus terms is always to make it easier to find items in the catalogue, as well as to give a short indication there of the content.²²

A bit of history

Finally, a short story about a long time ago, something from the library archive that Marlene van Doorn showed me when I first came to work at the ASCL: two letters from 1953. I must first say that, before the ASCL Library catalogue went online and thesaurus terms started to be used for subject indexing, our library used classification codes to make the books discoverable by topic. We used the UDC, the Universal Decimal Code, an international system of decidedly complex notations.

The first letter is from The Dutch Institute for Registration and Filing (*Het Nederlands Instituut voor Documentatie en Registratuur - NIDER*). It is a response to a telephone call from Mr Lucien Adam of the African Studies Centre, then the Africa Institute, asking which UDC code to use for the term *voertaal in het onderwijs* (language of instruction). Somewhat surprisingly, the answer suggests classifying this as a subtype of *Sondersprachen*²³. The answer must have puzzled Mr Adam, because he scribbles on the letter a note to a Ms Jolles, on whose behalf he has apparently asked the question, ‘*Zeer geachte Mevr. Jolles, Gaat U hiermee accoord?*’ - Do you agree with this? The other letter is Ms Jolles’s diplomatic response to Mr Adam: ‘*tot mijn spijt [kan ik mij hiermee] niet geheel verenigen*’ - To my regret, I cannot fully agree with this. She writes that, until further notice, she prefers to keep using her own code and that she will get in touch with the NIDER herself and let Mr Adam know the outcome in due course.

22 For examples of thesaurus terms, see the list of special library items (page 77 and further).

23 The NIDER used a German-language version of the UDC. A *Sondersprache* can be defined as a subvariety of a language only understood by a certain social group (i.e. jargon, argot, cant, slang) <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Sondersprache>

How this ended we unfortunately don't know. There are no further documents in the archive.

Aan de Heer Dr. L. Adam
AFRIKA INSTITUUT
Beyenburg 6
L e d e n

11 Juli 1953

Ingekomen d.d. 11/7/53
Bent u op ons schr. no. B tel.
Och entw. no. B d.d. ☒
behoefend door.

Naar aanleiding van uw telefonisch verzoek zou ik u
aanraden voor voertaal in het onderwijs te gebruiken:
409.3:37

409.3 staat in de code aangegeven als Sonderesprachen,
waarbij als voorbeelden worden aangehaald 409.312 Sprache
der Belgien, 409.313 Rechtsprache.
U kunt dit begrip natuurlijk ook onder 37(409.3) classeren,
waardoor U in rangschikking in de rubriek onderwijs blijft.
In de hoop U hiermede naar keuze te hebben ingelicht,

Zeer geacht Mr. Jolles,
→ Gaat u hiermee akkoord?
L. Adam

The letter from The Dutch Institute for
Registration and Filing (*Het Nederlands
Instituut voor Documentatie en Registratuur*
– *NIDER*) to Mr Lucien Adam of the African
Studies Centre, with note to Ms Jolles.

1111 A'dam 82
Afrika-Instituut Leiden
No. A-558

Zeer geacht Heer Adam,

Mag ik beginnen met
U mijn excuses aan te bieden,
omdat ik Uw brief van 11-7-53
tot nu toe onbekend was?
Het was mij geheel onbekent.
Het de opzending, die het
Nider aangeeft van het begrip
Voertaal (37:409.3), heb
ik mij tot mijn spijt niet
geheel vertrokken. Ik i. herp
het begrip Voertaal met de
bijzondere taalwetenschap (4)
aanwijzing of niet te maken.
Ik zou daarna gaarne tot
maken van mijn eigen code en
dat wilten aanhouden en
aan de Heer K. Hof van,
welke overzichten te ditte

Ms Jolles's response to Mr Adam.