

Perspectives on geographic location: The Muslim West in two classification systems

Heather Lea Moulaison

University of Ottawa School of Information Studies

200 Lees Ave., B157-D

Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5

hmoulais@uottawa.ca

ABSTRACT

Bias is inherent in classification systems because culture and worldview are linked. A Moroccan library's specialized collection on the Muslim West (*Ibn Rushd*) offers culturally adapted intellectual access to materials through the Ibn Rushd Thesaurus (IRT) and accompanying classification scheme. This paper compares the specialized Moroccan scheme for describing location in the historical and modern Muslim West and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) scheme's notations for the same locations. The systems differ primarily in their approaches to grouping land masses and to considering history. DDC, when used in conjunction with the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names Online (TGN) easily provides access to 80% of Moroccan and Western Saharan locations listed in the IRT, to 92% of Iberian locations, and to other Moroccan and Western Saharan locations not mentioned in the IRT. The benefits of providing culturally-adapted access to a specialized collection include a more intuitive approach to access for users in accordance with the contents of the collection. Drawbacks include potentially isolating Muslim scholars from a globalized approach to describing location and reinforcing a specialized worldview.

Keywords

Classification, culture, taxonomy, Muslim West, Morocco, geographic location, comparative studies.

INTRODUCTION

Intellectual access to documents requires an assessment of *aboutness*, and generally takes place using tools such as classification schemes or thesauri/lists of descriptors to provide systematic access to documents. Any formal representation of worldview such as a thesaurus of descriptors assumes relationships between concepts;

relationships may be semantically equivalent, hierarchical, or associative (ANSI/NISO, 2005). It is widely acknowledged that classification systems in use in the West, including the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) scheme, demonstrate a cultural bias (i.e. Olson, 2001). Accordingly, we expect tools for intellectual access to documents in non-Western collections to exhibit an approach that is not in concert with Western biases.

One of Morocco's premiere libraries, the library of the Fondation du Roi Abdul Aziz (the Fondation), collects in the social and human aspects of the Muslim West. Access to surrogates for their *Ibn Rushd* collection of monographs, theses, journals, articles, and other documents related to Muslim West studies is available online. A locally created thesaurus (Ibn Rushd Thésaurus, 1998) provides bilingual French-Arabic subject access to the *Ibn Rushd* collection. A syndetic structure demonstrates relationships between terms in the Ibn Rushd Thesaurus (IRT). Each term is also associated with the local classification scheme, a mixed notation (letters and numbers) used to identify and organize the collection's resources. Main classes in the IRT's classification scheme are grouped into four areas: general descriptors, subject areas, geographic areas, and proper names.

Because the IRT is French-Arabic bilingual, it is possible for French-speaking researchers to study the contents of the thesaurus and compare the contents to other systems used in the West. This paper focuses on one of the main classes under geographic areas: the Muslim West. In investigating geographic terms and notation supporting access to a collection on the Muslim West, this paper will also compare IRT terms and coverage with the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)'s Table 2 for geographic areas. In certain instances, the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names Online¹ (TGN) was consulted for further clarification. The goal of this paper is to evaluate similarities and divergences in approaches to organization between the two systems, and to use observations as a springboard to a discussion of the links between classification, culture, and intellectual access.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture and intellectual access

The worldview or ontology underlying a taxonomy influences the structure and relationships in the resulting thesaurus or classification scheme. Decimal classification systems like the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) scheme and the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) scheme have been adopted in both Western and non-Western countries (Countries with UDC, 2008; Dewey, 2010). DDC and UDC are used in French libraries, Moroccan libraries, Egyptian libraries, and many others, reinforcing the notion that decimal classifications have an appeal on a fundamental level. Bates (1998) suggests that the DDC scheme may actually demonstrate a use of “common underlying patterns across cultures and languages,” helping it align with a number of cultures’ intrinsic folk classifications (p. 1191). Further reasons for the international and intercultural success of DDC may be that 1) non-Anglo-American cultures are adequately represented in the schedules and tables and number-building permits the creation of classification numbers that are sufficiently close for the breadth and depth of library collections in non-Western cultures and 2) the publications that will be collected and made available in these libraries reflect more or less the publishing patterns evidenced in Anglo-American libraries, or have few enough volumes that close classification is not necessary. Even if DDC does not give as much attention to non-Western concepts, it gives enough attention and provides a degree of flexibility, allowing the scheme to work broadly as an organization of information tool. Indeed, DDC is the classification scheme in use for the monographs at the Fondation’s library, with minor local modifications made to class numbers.

The creator of a taxonomy, the classifier, and the user ideally share a world view, facilitating an intuitive discovery process for end-users of the system. DDC lacks specific geographic access in the schedules and in Table 2 for the two stated areas of focus at the Fondation: the *Muslim-Arab* space and the *Maghreb*². *North Africa* is included in a *Class here* note under Tunisia and Libya, and *Maghreb* appears in the Relative Index, directing users to the Tunisia and Libya class number. Maghrebi scholars in the West do not use the terms *North Africa* and *Maghreb* interchangeably, as *North Africa* is a geographic designation and *Maghreb* tends to be a cultural designation, including former colonies of France and Italy in the northernmost part of Africa. It is not clear that the *Maghreb* is best accessed through the number for Libya and Tunisia. Although an adapted DDC is sufficient for organizing the physical collections at the Fondation, staff at the Fondation created a specialized thesaurus (1998) for organizing resources outside the purview of the publishing world that are more directly related to the focus of the collection and, it can be expected, to user need.

Access to information in the Muslim-Arab World

Access to information in the Muslim Arab world continues to be problematic, despite the initiatives of the Fondation. The UN Arab Knowledge Report (2009) presents a dismal state of knowledge and information access in Muslim Arab sections of the Middle East and Africa, including Morocco, hindering scholarship and the spread of new ideas. The report finds that knowledge capital in Arab countries without oil is low (p. 121), scholarship is not as rigorous as in the West (p. 204), and equitable access to quality education is limited (p. 131-2). Reports focusing on comparative librarianship also signal inequalities between Muslim Arab areas and the West, and indicate that declining gross national products (GNP) and increasing population sizes are hindering advancements in education and scholarship in the Middle East (Aman, 2006). The mission and activities of the Fondation’s library are unique in Morocco, and were designed to address needs of the local scholarly community (Présentation, 2003).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For the purpose of this short paper, two related research questions were selected for study:

- What differences exist in the way that IRT and the DDC provide intellectual access to geographic locations in the Muslim West?
- Can a universal classification scheme like DDC offer adequate access to a specialized collection?

This study assumes that the taxonomy underlying the IRT and classification scheme is by definition different from a “general knowledge organization tool” (DDC, 2003, xxxvii) like DDC by virtue of the creators, their mission, and the collection being accessed. Using a published version of the IRT, the Muslim West as location was analyzed and compared with the access accorded these same areas in the 22nd edition the DDC (2003), per Table 2 of the auxiliary tables. Because DDC is universal in scope, we expect that it will be possible to locate many of the IRT locations in Table 2 of the auxiliary tables in DDC, but that the relationships and hierarchies might not be identical.

METHODOLOGY

Geographic terms from the IRT were listed in a spreadsheet with their corresponding classification notation (one letter and a series of meaningful numbers based on the level of hierarchy represented). The Iberian Peninsula and Morocco and the Western Sahara were chosen as examples of geographic treatment of the Muslim West as applied to Europe and to North Africa. Classification notations from IRT were compared directly with the notation in the DDC tables for correlations. When in doubt, locations were searched in the TGN. To facilitate progress and minimize errors, entries from the online version of the thesaurus were loaded into the spreadsheet and assigned IRT notation manually using the paper copy of the thesaurus as a guide.

² <http://www.fondation.org.ma/fondlatin/fondatio.htm>

Based on the spreadsheet, maps using the Google API, a mind map (not discussed here), and tables were created.

RESULTS

The Fondation's *Ibn Rushd* collection focuses on the Muslim West, an area that is rich in history, having stretched onto two continents throughout the past thousand years or so. The first listed main class in the geography section of the IRT, the 'N' class, focuses on the Muslim West. A total of 438 notations representing Muslim West locations are listed for twelve present day countries and political areas (Morocco, n=114; Spain, n=100; Algeria, n=93; Tunisia, n=57; Mauritania, n=32; Libya, n=22; Western Sahara, n=8; Portugal, n=6; Mali, n=2; Niger, n=1; Ghana, n=1; Italy (Sicily), n=1). (See Figure 1 below or online version: <http://www.moulaison.net/MoroccanMuslimWest.html>)

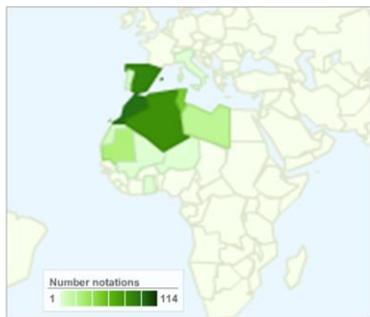


Figure 1. Number of locations with notation in the N class of the IRT, by country.

Overlap in classification notation between the IRT and DDC were studied for the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco and the Western Sahara territory claimed by Morocco. Of the 106 combined Spanish and Portuguese locations of interest to Muslim studies scholars listed in the IRT, 98 (93%) were mentioned or covered in DDC. Of the 122 locations in Morocco and the Western Sahara, almost 80% were mentioned in some form in DDC; terms not in the DDC tended to be names of rivers or physical features of the land. See Table 1 for more details. As a point of comparison, Moroccan and Western Saharan locations in the DDC can be counted. Of the 93 primary locations (i.e. excluding suburbs of cities) mentioned in the DDC, 23% (n=21) were not in the IRT. See Figure 2 below.

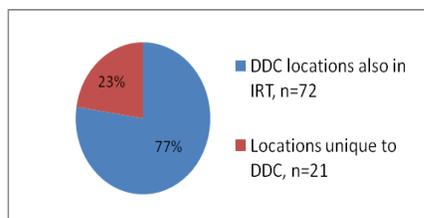


Figure 2. Uniqueness of Moroccan and Western Saharan geographic locations in DDC.

DISCUSSION

The groupings of land masses as interpreted in the IRT and DDC are fundamentally different. DDC lists modern locations by continent and divides by current country and divisions within that country. The ancient world receives different treatment, but coverage does not extend further into the Common Era than the end of the Roman Empire. IRT groups by historic areas of conquer and discovery for the Muslim West. In doing so, the IRT's practice permits facets of history and time to complement and accompany the facet of location throughout. Locations like Guadix and Niebla, indicated in the IRT and in the TGN because of their historical importance in Muslim history, were not included by name in the DDC; they no longer exist and are classed by the current province in which these locations are found. A similar problematic can be considered when studying Native Americans whose tribal lands spanned modern states and countries. The Arab Knowledge Report

Locations	Spain and Portugal	Morocco and Western Sahara
In the IRT (N=)	106	122
IRT terms in DDC outright or in notes	54	72
IRT locations covered in DDC but not mentioned outright	43	25
IRT terms/locations not in TGN or DDC	8	25
% IRT locations with potential for close treatment in DDC	92.45% (n=97)	79.50% (n=97)

Table 1. Comparative number of terms for locations.

(2009) issues a call for Arabs to move beyond tradition and the past to "fuller reconciliation with the values of the world we belong to" (p. 17) as a way of tempering religious extremism. Mixing the past and present, former dynasties and modern locations, instead of using the Western continent-based approach is evident in the IRT's taxonomy of geographic location.

Until this point, this paper has only considered the problem of organization of information from the point of view of the classifier, an information professional with access to a thesaurus and the Web who will likely make systematic use of high-quality online resources like the TGN. Since the DDC is able to represent 80% of the locations of interest in Morocco and over 90% of locations important to Western Islamic studies on the Iberian Peninsula without requiring the use of a thesaurus other than the TGN, the assumption is that at least these percentages of library materials would be classed closely and correctly in a library using full Dewey. The question of how reasonable it is to assume that libraries, even very specialized libraries, would need to

provide such close classification begins to surface. Even in a specialized collection, would it not be more effective and efficient to class such specialized works broadly as a means of shortening otherwise overly-precise call numbers and facilitating access?

From the user's point of view, could it be said that DDC is a tool of globalization when describing location, forcing an outsider's perspective on a very local act of claiming place and history? North Africa's uneasy relationship with colonial France in the first part of the 20th century was brought to an end amid celebrations of nationalism. Yet that nationalism and celebration of the Arab past is not in line with Western perceptions of location. Muslim West scholars, when searching for items in Western collections classed using DDC, would surely be able to orient themselves to find the appropriate section of the library and to browse the works, collocated by continent and country? North African works would have the potential to be somewhat separated from the Iberian Peninsula works, depending on the collection in question. However, when the locations are used in number building under an already Muslim topic, logically there would only be Muslim-Arab locations included, facilitating the browsing by location.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a comparison of terms and intellectual access for geographic location in the Muslim West through the DDC and the IRT, a specialized classification scheme. The DDC has been criticized for being overly culturally biased, not providing equitable access to non-Western ideas. This access, although not equitable, appears to be sufficient for geographic access despite fundamental differences in the underlying approaches to perceiving the world's land masses in space and time.

Further research is required to understand if differing approaches to organization, for location and for other elements, hinder discovery for Muslim Arab researchers in Western libraries. Can and should information policies in Arab countries incorporate Western distinctions between past and present when addressing the question of geography?

The international successes of DDC as a tool for organization of information should also be studied, with the goal of building an internationally viable verbal subject access tool. Classification is arguably less important as we move to online collections not requiring "shelf locations" such as ebooks or virtual library materials. Decimal classification like DDC already provides adequate access to specialized collections in non-Anglophone and non-Western countries as evidenced in their continued use and adaptation. Where, then, do we go from here in providing international access to specialized materials?

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