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Classification Assignment #2
IST631 Theory of Classification and Subject Representation
Syracuse University, School of Information Studies
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October 22, 2000

Bliss Classification

Overview

This paper builds on David Pimentel's paper at the following URL:

http://istwebct.syr.edu/kwasnik631/student_pres/Pimentel/assign2_bib_classif.html

The Bliss Classification (BC) system (sometimes referred to as bibliographic classification) was originally devised by Henry Evelyn Bliss (1870-1955) starting in 1902.¹ and finally culminating in 1953 with the publication of "*A Bibliographic Classification*". This work was done in the United States. The Bliss Bibliographic Classification system is a significant and novel system, but often considered obscure. Unfortunately, despite continued interest and development, the Bliss classification system of classifying knowledge is in danger of being overlooked.¹ Bliss's three-volume work; "The Organization of Knowledge" published in 1929 was introduced by John Dewey as "monumental"⁴.

There are considered to be two generational-versions of the Bliss Classification, BC1 and BC2.

Basic Bliss

BC1 is the first generation scheme directly attributable to Henry E. Bliss. The original system uses a combination of letters and numbers to specify the defined classes of a book. The numerals 1-9 and letters A through Z are combined to provide 35 classes with numerals preceding

letters in the shelf order. Materials with the same shelf mark are then filed according to a three letter suffix which denotes the author, editor or person written about.

Second Generation Bliss

BC2 is a second generation of the Bliss classification scheme revised by The Bliss Classification Association under the editorship of Jack Mills. The Bliss Classification Association was founded in the United Kingdom in 1967, and promotes the use and further development of the Bliss classification scheme.¹³ It was discovered that almost all libraries currently using the Bliss Classification system seem to be in the United Kingdom.

The system is highly regarded for its ability to be adaptive and hospitable as a bibliographical classification scheme.¹ However, the Bliss scheme is not nearly as popular as LCC and Dewey. BC2 is based on the original Bliss Classification system but also uses Ranganathan's facets to further describe and cross-reference other basic classes.¹⁴

It has been said that the BC2 classification structure resembles fractal theory representation in the regards that the subject can be explored down layers of the initial search subject and expand into new enlightening details (by facet association) to reveal new details and associations with other basic information related to the original search material. The contemporary Bliss classification can provide extremely powerful associations. For example, if a search is initially begun on a biological science down to a molecular science level, facet information may point to molecular-level synthetic electronic memory elements. Research that was performed in an physical electronics domain may find practical use in biology research. The ability to perform associative possibilities across very wide disciplinary chasms could prove extremely beneficial to mankind and the furtherance of science, technology and the entire human experience. It is believed that the

Bliss system is the best equipped bibliographical system to provide far reaching associations into the unknown of today and in the future.

The system is based on a coding using the letters A-Z in alphabetical sequences for the main subjects, and subdividing them by lower case letters a-z, and numbers 1-9 for really detailed subject specifications.

Arranged into 35 main classes, consisting of 9 numerical (zero is not used) and 26 alphabetical classes, it has a notation system using uppercase and lowercase roman letters, with Arabic numerals for major fixed categories or common subdivisions. Commas and apostrophes separate adjacent letters or groups of letters that, when combined into a single class mark, might be read as a single unit; they also avoid confusion of letters for numbers.

Potential Confusion about Bliss Classification^{18.19.}

The Bliss Classification Scheme has *nothing* to do with Bliss symbols (Blissymbols) originally developed by *Charles K. Bliss* (1897-1985) for the purpose of international communication and subsequently used for handicapped communication. It can be easy to confuse these two systems (names) since they are both important aspects of 20th century information science.

The Inventor of Bliss Classification, Henry Evelyn Bliss

Henry Bliss attended City College in New York beginning in 1885 and through a non-direct path eventually became Assistant Librarian at City College until his retirement in 1940.¹

Approximately 1 year ago in casual conversation about my information science studies with my Father (Victor, Lyle Dowdell, Jr.) I discovered that *he* had lived with Henry Evelyn Bliss for approximately a 6 month period in the early 1950s.

All together, with my Father, my Aunt (Florrie Fasanelli, PhD), my Grandparents, (Rev. Victor Lyle Dowdell, D.D. and Francis K. Dowdell), shared the company of this interesting man. Henry Bliss was an extremely polite and gentle individual capable of great depth of thought in science, philosophy, religion, and humanity. At this point in his life, he was elderly but alert with white hair. He had been friends of my Grandparents for many years before and after living with the family in Tivoli N.Y. and had correspondence with them over the years. My aunt remembers that when my grandmother heard of Bliss's death, she stated that "She had owed him a letter." This period that they lived together was well after publishing the "Classification of Knowledge" and was a time of retirement and perhaps more philosophical and artistic endeavors than of the rigors of classification system development and refinement.¹⁷ Henry Bliss was a poet and had written poetry for almost all of his life. It appears that the classification work was just part of his life but perhaps not of his basic passions. Henry Bliss was (at the time he stayed with my Grandparents) a vegetarian and a non-drinker.¹⁶

In the following quotation he gives testimony of his depth of thought and philosophical and scientific nature.

"If science be regarded as organized knowledge and philosophy as organized thought, grounded on scientific knowledge, tho extending beyond it to speculative realms, the structural organization for knowledge and thought which has been outlined...may be regarded as the logical fabric of a microcosm, mental, intellectual, and scientific, which is consistent with and correlative to the intrinsic physical organization of the cosmos, the macrocosm."—Henry Evelyn Bliss, 1947³.

If a case study were to be performed in what it takes to produce an effective base for an adaptable (extensible) classification system, it appears that Henry Bliss had what was needed. Bliss was a self-described "jack of all trades."¹ His passion for understanding the human experi-

ence combined with his ability to organize and articulate basic thoughts of science, philosophy and art in a two-dimensional environment of numbers and letters will prevent the Bliss Classification scheme from falling into obscurity. It will rise in popularity as it is discovered and as the need for increased efficiencies in associative properties in bibliographic classification increases.

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*Charles,
Beautiful. Conceptually interesting
and specific without getting bogged down
in detail.*

15/15

New York, Sept. 30th, 1947.

Rev. Victor Lyle Dowdell, D.D.,
St. Paul's Church, Tivoli, N.Y.,

Dear Mr. Dowdell:

It is a vivid pleasure to recall the pleasant hour I enjoyed with you and your family a month ago in your new Rectory. I quickly discovered some of your intellectual and spiritual interests, among them poetry, and especially 'Dante. It is many years since I was romancing under the poetic influence of Dante and Rossetti, but they were one of the joys of those years. I had an especial fondness for some of Rossetti's finest sonnets, while my wife was as fond of some of Christina's and some of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

As I promised, I am sending you separately by book-post a copy of a little book of mine, Better Late than Never, in which you may find some of the influence of poets you have loved. In this I hope your lovely wife will participate. To her now I would lay in her hands some of the spiritual homage I offered in your interesting home.

Sincerely,

Henry Edwin Bliss

C/o B. de Koster,
424 East 51st Street,
New York, 22, N.Y.