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The Répertoire de vedettes-matière and RAMEAU: Two Indexing Languages in French: A Necessary Luxury ?

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Abstract :

Two indexing languages - the RVM (Canada) and RAMEAU (France) - for one language: French. Does this not represent a paradox and, perhaps, an unnecessary luxury?

In this paper, we will try and demonstrate the contrary by presenting two types of reasons which explain this necessity: Linguistic and cultural reasons, on the one hand; administrative and managerial reasons, on the other.

The autonomy shown by the two languages does not necessarily mean that they ignore each other, on the contrary. The spirit of collaboration which drives both institutions is supported by an official agreement as well as with day to day cooperation.

0. Introduction

Two indexing languages - the RVM (Canada) and RAMEAU (France) - for one language: French. Does this not represent a paradox and, perhaps, an unnecessary luxury?

In this paper, we will try and demonstrate the contrary as well as taking the time to reflect on how to set forth national realities and necessary international cooperation.

1. A brief history

1.1 The Laval RVM

In the late 1940s, Université Laval catalogers noticed, while referring to the Library of Congress *National Union Catalog* (NUC), that quite a fair number of the documents they acquired had already been analyzed and indexed by other libraries using the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH). When the cost of document processing is taken into account, we can easily understand that the solution was readily apparent. Rather than starting anew, it seemed more advantageous to use the NUC bibliographic records. However, the American subject headings, stemming from LCSH would have to be translated. This task was begun starting in 1946 and resulted in the publication, in 1962, of the first edition of the *Répertoire de vedettes-matière*.

This first edition, published on paper, contained 11,000 headings, mainly in the arts, literature and social sciences fields. Today, the RVM contains 203,900 subject headings divided into 157,200 common names and 46,700 geographic names and toponyms. Additionally, there are 4,000 subdivisions and 253,000 unauthorized headings. The RVM is available in three formats, Web, CD-ROM and in a downloadable format that can be imported in a library's integrated system (<http://www.bibl.ulaval.ca/adele/rvm.html>).

Throughout the years many elements were added to help indexers in their work. In 1994, in addition to LCSH, RVM obtained permission to use, as English equivalents to its subject headings, the terms contained in the National Library of Medicine (USA) *Medical Subject Headings* (MeSH) and the J. Paul Getty Trust *Art & Architecture Thesaurus* (AAT). 10,800 terms from AAT and 2,000 terms from MeSH are searchable in our database. In the near future, 8,000 more MeSH terms will be added. In addition, we have started including LC classification numbers in the records of our new subject headings as well as in those of the headings that we modify.

It is true that the Université Laval Library copy catalogs a large part of its English language documents. However, the French language documents are, for the most part, indexed by librarians that are specialists in their fields. The terms or concepts needed by these indexers are not always present in the English language subject lists. RVM personnel have always shown concern for fulfilling these needs. Thus, some 24,000 original French subject headings have been added to RVM without any form of English equivalent.

In the beginning, RVM was developed as an in-house tool. Over time, as each subsequent edition appeared, increasingly greater numbers of libraries expressed interest in using the headings and asked that RVM be made available to them.

Thus, in 1974, the National Library of Canada adopted RVM as the national standard for subject indexing in French. The same year, the Bibliothèque publique d'information du Centre Georges-Pompidou (Paris) also adopted RVM. They were followed by other institutions such as the National Library of Québec (1976), the National Library of France (1980) and the National Library of Luxembourg (2001). Today, in addition to nearly all types

of French language libraries in Québec, RVM's client base includes such libraries as the International Criminal Court (The Netherlands), the Free University of Brussels (Belgium) and the University of Seville (Spain). Negotiations are ongoing with OCLC who may, in the future, offer bilingual bibliographic records to its clients.

The development and updating of RVM is provided by a team of six librarians who are on constant watch for evolution in the French language. They are also responsible for the meticulous upgrade of RVM.

1.2 Rameau

In the early 1980s, with the advent of library automation, the National Library of France (BnF) (1980) and the university libraries (1983), decided to adopt a unique list of subject headings, which would later be known as the *Répertoire d'autorité-matière encyclopédique et alphabétique unifié* (Rameau). This list is, since its beginnings, largely inspired by the Laval RVM, from which it originates, and secondarily from LCSH.

The initial choice made by the BnF explains why Rameau is managed within the BN-OPALE PLUS catalog (<http://catalogue.bnf.fr>) by the Centre national Rameau which comes under the Agence bibliographique nationale. Nonetheless, the Rameau language is developed according to user demand, both internal and external to the BnF. These users form a nationwide network, which extends throughout France and beyond since some French-language Belgian libraries have joined. Constantly expanding, the Rameau language now holds 256,000 terms of which 88,000 are common names and 46,000 are geographical names.

Rameau has gradually become an imperative in France to the point of being today the national indexing language shared by most of the libraries and numerous organisations, both public and private. This trend can only increase because of the possibility now being offered to libraries to download free of charge bibliographic records from the BN-OPALE PLUS catalog which are indexed with Rameau. This national context may explain why other indexing languages in France, such as *Motbis*, used by the Centre national de documentation pédagogique, try to establish correspondences with the Rameau language.

Rameau's national expansion has been accompanied by the establishment of an institutional and technical infrastructure by the Centre national Rameau:

- user and partner network organization, governed by an agreement, with its representative authorities, a strategic orientation committee and an operational committee for technical follow up;
- supplying Rameau products on a regular basis: *Liste d'autorité Rameau*, free online (<http://noticesrameau.bnf.fr>); *Guide d'indexation Rameau*, of which the 6th edition was published in 2004; *Journal des créations et des modifications*, indicating the most recent evolutions to the language, also available online;
- implementation of the Rameau website (<http://rameau.bnf.fr>) in 2000, which includes the Fichier national des propositions Rameau (enabling users to make direct suggestions for creating or modifying headings), as well as training aids (educational support).

At the same time, cooperative alliances have been formed with other European partners: The MACS Project (Multilingual ACcess to Subjects, <http://laborix.uvt.nl/prj/macs>); adaptation of Rameau in Poland and now in Romania. Welcoming foreign interns some for a period of two

to three months, by the Centre national Rameau enables fruitful exchanges which nourish the thought process of both parties.

Building on these assets, the Centre national Rameau can now go to the next step in the development of the Rameau language which consists in a general revision, systematic and progressive, of the vocabulary (common names) in order to improve its quality and at the same time increase its effectiveness for the end user. This task will deliberately favour the terminological level of the language (i.e. headings, unauthorized headings and cross-references because it is this indissociable “terminological cluster” which forms the “hard core” of the language and controls direct access to information) as well as the semantic level (i.e., the links between headings which enable navigation throughout the language, something like an “ontology”). On the other hand, less importance will be given to syntax (legacy of card catalogs using precoordinated subjects via LCSH), despite the vexing problems it poses, because syntax is becoming more and more difficult to reform for the too many modifications it would entail in the indexes of library catalogs.

2. Two French indexing languages: a necessary luxury

At the start, the choice of developing the Rameau language based on the Laval RVM can be easily explained: Why take the time and trouble, as well as the risk, to duplicate the quality work already being done elsewhere?

Nevertheless, Rameau, which was naturally very close to Laval (and to the LCSH) in the beginning, has felt the need to acquire throughout the years more and more autonomy. Why? Does this not represent a paradox and, perhaps, an unnecessary luxury, nationalism or is it not a fair level of efficiency?

There are two main types of circumstances for this necessity:

- linguistic and cultural ;
- administrative and managerial.

We will see that this situation does not prohibit fruitful cooperation between the Laval RVM and Rameau.

2.1 Linguistic and cultural circumstances

The Laval RVM and Rameau are indexing languages based on natural language (not on an abstract classification scheme for example). But, in using natural language, a local or national dimension is unavoidable. The French language in Québec is not exactly the same as the French language in France and vice versa (the same is true for the English language which is not quite the same in Australia or New Zealand as it is in the United States). For example, in one case, *Biens culturels* is chosen while *Patrimoine culturel* is chosen in the other; *Lieux historiques* vs. *Sites historiques*; etc. This is quite normal and legitimate.

The same goes for cultural circumstances. Reality can be envisioned in different manners. Certain aspects might have to be developed for one place that might not be applicable elsewhere, for historical or other reasons. Even the academic approach to certain subjects might differ (for example, prehistory is not approached in the same way in North America as it is in Europe). And even if these differences should not be artificially exaggerated, two

different ways to see the world are face to face, one North-American, the other European. As one Quebecer once said: “In America I feel French; in France I feel American”.

These factors influence the way library patrons in various countries search the library catalog, even if they speak the same language. Therefore, if it is an admitted fact when creating an indexing language, that the main concern should be to render life easier for the users, these languages must reflect as much as possible the local linguistic and cultural usages. Thus, we have the legitimate existence of the RVM Laval and Rameau, two languages serving their respective French-speaking patrons who admittedly share the French language but have nonetheless specific needs.

2.2 Administrative and managerial circumstances

To the linguistic and cultural circumstances, administrative and managerial circumstances are also present.

For the RVM, evolving in a bilingual context, using cataloging copy for bibliographic records from other institutions (French or English), and with the added concern of being able to machine translate LCSH headings into French, the RVM must respect, as much as possible, the syntax chosen by the creators of LCSH. Adaptations are held to a strict minimum (except for cross references and unauthorized headings added to enrich headings).

Rameau, on the other hand, admittedly being inspired by LCSH, considers them as one source among others (even if they are higher priority). Thus Rameau more readily diverges, not only from the American headings themselves, but from certain semantic fields altogether if they are too far in meaning from the French fields as found in references and literature.

National specificities also appear in the concern for efficiency and adaptability of the two languages: the RVM team and the Centre national Rameau (through the Fichier national des propositions Rameau en ligne) both strive to answer as quickly as possible to their respective patrons' needs and demands. Thus, there is a necessity to be in close proximity to their patrons and to not have to rely on an external structure or agreement for the creation and modification of headings, to obtain permissions, etc. (cf., deadlines, availability, etc.).

2.3. Autonomous but expressing solidarity

The autonomy demonstrated by both languages does not mean that they ignore each other. On the contrary, all the more so since it would be bad form for Rameau to forget its debt towards the RVM from which it originates and continues to consider as a preferred source.

The agreement uniting Université Laval and BnF has thus been renewed in November 2004. It sets the framework for cooperation between the RVM and Rameau, while at the same time respecting each institution's autonomy, servicing the French-speaking community. Many provisions of this text which can be found on the Rameau Web site (<http://rameau.bnf.fr> under the heading *S'informer > Développements internationaux*) can be summarized as such:

- reciprocal citation in each others headings and products;
- reciprocal exchange of products and access to data;

- exchange and sharing of experiences and thoughts (in particular at the time of regular meetings which are held every two years, alternately in each country)

But it is also through the day-to-day work that both teams experience this collaboration with great respect for one another:

- systematic consultation of both databases when creating or modifying a subject heading;
- exchange of thoughts about the best way to translate into French new scientific concepts for which there are no French language sources (there is, in particularly specialized areas, co-creation of French subject headings);
- improvement of the language on either side of the Atlantic, to the benefit of each of the partners;
- etc.

3. Conclusion

The existence of two indexing languages, The Laval RVM and Rameau, in one language is thus a necessary luxury because of different national circumstances which cannot be ignored, both for linguistic and cultural circumstances or sound administrative and managerial circumstances. The intellectual and institutional independence does not hinder active collaboration--much to the contrary, relations based on confident friendship are ongoing.

From a more general point of view, we feel that this model can be a good example of a just equilibrium between two risks and two pitfalls: an overcautious withdrawal on to oneself on the one hand, and a reckless forging ahead of an artificial uniformity on the other hand--uniformity being wrongly confused with true international collaboration, respectful of local requirements.

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