The contribution of Ranganathan's facets to the determination of aboutness in novels

Patrícia de Almeida | Mª Graça Simões | Daniel Martínez-Ávila


**Aboutness in Literature**

- Many authors pointed that the determination of subject in indexing is a complex, meticulous and demanding process.

- The indexing of fictional Literature is made more complicated by the fact that it is notoriously difficult to determine subject in a consistent, exhaustive and specific way (Bell, 1992; Campbell, 2000; Moraes, 2012).

- Notwithstanding, there has been a growing interest in this area over the last thirty years (Moraes, 2012).
Portugal

- The indexing of fictional Literature is not a common practice in Portuguese libraries (UDC 8).

- Portuguese language lacks an adequate translation of the term aboutness:
  
  subject = assunto
  aboutness = ??????

- In the Brazilian literature, different terms have been used for aboutness:
  'atinência', 'concernência', 'temacidade', 'tematicidade' (Fujita, 2003; Naves, 2004; Silva & Fujita, 2004)

- It is most frequent the use of the expression ‘tratar de’ (to address) and the use of preposition ‘sobre’ (about).

- The meaning of aboutness is not very well understood...
- ‘aboutness and subject should be considered synonymous in LIS’ (Hjørland, 2016).

- The concept of subject can be understood differently according to:
  - diverse theories in the literature (epistemological perspective);
  - diverse meanings in different communities (subjective perspective).

- Multidimensionality of fictional Literature
  (Bell, 1992; Saarti, 1999; Hypén & Mäkelä, 2011)

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The multidimensionality and subjectivity seem to be the main obstacles for subject indexing of fictional Literature.

At least in theory, there is a possibility of determining the aboutness/subject of fictional texts (although not universally) as well as indexing fictional works with some level of consistency and replicability (Saarti, 2002; Hypén & Mäkelä, 2011; Moraes, 2012; Fedeli, 2015).

Facet analysis and analytico-synthetic methods seem to be the most popular options (Pejtersen, 1979; Beghtol, 1994; Saarti, 1999; Šauperl, 2013; Fedeli, 2015):

- Faceted classifications allow an analysis of a subject by breaking it down into its constituent parts and decomposing the more complex elements into simple concepts, along with the synthesis of concepts.
Ranganathan's faceted approach

- The best-known faceted classification is Ranganathan’s Colon Classification.

- For Ranganathan, there is only five fundamental categories (of facets) in the universe of knowledge, the PMEST formula: Personality, Matter, Energy, Space and Time (Ranganathan, 1967).

- ‘Personality is the distinguishing characteristic of a subject. Matter is the physical material of which a subject may be composed. Energy is any action that occurs with respect to the subject. Space is the geographic component of the location of a subject. Time is the period associated with a subject’ (Hjørland, 2013).

- These categories would be valid to describe any area of knowledge.
The faceted approach is said to be the best one for arranging multidisciplinary and very detailed subjects (Tristão et al., 2004), as facets can represent the thematic structure of a text, allowing a logical approach to the process of indexing (Silva & Fujita, 2004).

This approach would suit the natural complexity and multidimensionality of fictional literature.

Other initiatives have applied Ranganathan's theories to fiction (cf. DuBoff, 2003) and a facet-analytic approach for the subject indexing of fiction:


- In Sweden, the *Thesaurus for the indexing of fiction* (Jansson & Södervall, 1987) advocated for a more elaborate system of categories, facets and sub-facets.

- In Finland, projects such as FinnONTO and Kirjasampo combined information from different sources and the knowledge of the users (Saarti & Hypén 2010; Hypén & Mäkelä 2011).

- Pejtersen (1979) suggested four categories:
  1. subject-matter;
  2. frame: time, place, social environment, profession;
  3. author’s intention/attitude;
  4. accessibility.

- Beghtol (1994) concluded that ‘characters’, ‘events’, ‘spaces’ and ‘times’ would be the fundamental categories in fiction.
Case Study

- **Objective:**
  To verify the efficiency of Ranganathan’s PMEST formula for the determination of the *aboutness* of novels from an openly subjectivist point of view.

- **Method:**
  Questionnaire to the users of a Portuguese public library
  - Users returning novels were asked by the library staff to fill out an anonymous questionnaire on the *aboutness* of the book.
  - It included five questions, asking the users to express their views on the Space / Time / Personality / Matter / Energy of the novel.
  - The meaning of these categories was not explained to the respondents; they were left open to their free interpretation (they were asked to follow their intuition even if they thought that the questions were awkward).
- Users were asked to provide up to nine terms per question.
- Answering all questions was not mandatory.
- Questionnaires were available throughout April 2017.
- In total, answers for 21 novels were collected (two of them were completed using sentences instead of terms and thus excluded from the study).
Profile

- Readers belonging to the age group 42-63.
- 68% of them had higher education and 32% had secondary education.
- 68% were women and 32% men.
- Six of the novels were by Portuguese writers and 10 by authors of other nationalities.
- Three writers were repeated as they have authored more than one novel.

Results

- The answers were grouped by facet category and the content analyzed in order to infer the meanings that users gave to each facet.
46 names of places (proper nouns and common nouns) and 4 adjectives that are believed to be characterizations of these spaces.
Readers identified the space facet as:
- city (Lisbon, Naples, Washington…) - 11 answers;
- country (Spain, Canada, Turkey…) - 9 answers;
- region (fjords, Middle East, Pantanal…) - 8 answers;
- common place (house, cemetery, forest…) - 8 answers;
- indeterminate place (Laios, Caligo, Brecha) - 3 answers;
- characterization (rural, bucolic, urban…) - 4 answers;
- village (Sagres, Mafra) - 2 answers;
- specific place (Hipocrene, Terçanabal) - 2 answers;
- vague place (desert island, city) - 2 answers;
- continent (Europe) - 1 answer.

All respondents associate it to the space location and the spaces where the action of the novel takes place.
Time facet

30 temporal (generic and specific) references and 3 elements characterizing the time.
Readers identified this facet as:
- century (20th century, 18th century, 16th century…) - 8 answers;
- generic time (past, present) - 7 answers;
- historical moment (Post-war, Gold Rush, Jesus' Time…) - 4 answers;
- indefinite period (memory, time, daily…) - 4 answers;
- definite period (one year, one day, one night) - 3 answers;
- characterization (timeless, inaccurate) - 3 answers;
- date (1950, 6th of January of 1997) - 2 answers;
- indefinite interval (wait for husband, life) - 2 answers.

Space is also very intuitive for the respondents, as all of them associate it with the chronological reference and temporal location of the action in the novel.
Personality facet

64 answers - more than half of them correspond to characters.
Readers identified this facet as:

- characters (19 proper names (Jack, Lila, Simão...) and seven unnamed individual characters (doorwoman, grandfather, woman...) and collective characters (people, two orphan brothers, boys...)) - 33 answers.
- indeterminate category (courage, rudeness, cruelty...) - 23 answers;
- characterization (convincing, passionate, intense...) - 4 answers;
- narrator (author, me) - 2 answers;
- object (“instrumentalina”) - 1 answer;
- animal (elephant) - 1 answer.

Personality represent mainly the characters of the novel. Answers related to the indeterminate category may correspond with the readers' view of the novel as a character. They attributed character traits to the reading giving the novel a true Personality.
Matter facet

60 answers – all of them nouns, most of them abstract nouns.
Readers identified this facet as:

- abstract nouns - 36 answers
  - action (fight, travel, suicide…) - 15 answers;
  - sentiments (faith, trust, love…) - 9 answers;
  - qualities (fidelity, wickedness, persistence…) - 9 answers;
  - state (misery) - 2 answers;
  - feelings (pain) - 1 answer.

- aspects that are relatively more specific but yet too varied for a possible consistent categorization (the essence of being, love conflicts, rural families…) - 24 answers.

The total nominalization of this facet seems to give it the characteristic of subject in the most lexicographic sense of the word (matter as the sum of the subjects of the novel).
Energy facet

51 answers (one reader left the question blank).
Readers identified this facet as:

- abstract subjects - 36 answers
  - actions (betrayal, overcoming, life…) - 14 answers;
  - feelings (sadness, tenderness, joys…) - 10 answers;
  - qualities (determination, creativity, depth…) - 8 answers;
  - characterization (volatile, positive, negative…) - 7 answers;
  - state (order) - 1 answer.
- subjects that are relatively specific but cannot be consistently categorized
  (music, money, family camaraderie…) - 11 answers.

Higher degree of abstraction and a greater number of actions (cf. semantic relation between the concepts of energy and action) - Energy may be the driving force of the narrative, that is moved forward by the actions of the characters, or the vibe that the readers felt during the reading or when they finished.
Conclusions

- The nature and number of answers per facet/question reveal that although this community of readers might have felt an intuitive familiarity with Ranganathan's facet categories, they did not necessarily understand their original meaning.

  - **Time** - period associated to the subject.
  - **Space** - geographical component of the location of the subject.
  - **Personality** - it did not clearly show the distinguishing characteristics of the subject, but significantly focused on the characters of the novels.
  - **Matter** - it dealt with matters in a generalist and abstract way, without any reference to the physical material.
  - **Energy** - it corresponded with both the actions that make the narrative advance and the effects that the novel provoked on the readers and not to any action that occurs with respect to the subject.

- There were no answers referring to the form and the signifier, but only to the content and the signified.
- There were some subjects that are considered objective and factual (temporal and spatial locations and the characters) as well as others that are subjective or expressive (those related to characterizations).

- The answers showed little specificity in relation to the subject (several facets are needed for their representation and retrieval).

- The disparity of the results and our difficulties to categorize some answers corroborate the subjective nature of the determination of the subject; there are inconsistencies caused by the multidimensionality and subjectivity of both the literary texts and the determination of the aboutness.

- The hypothesis of Ranganathan's PMEST categories could be helpful for the indexing of novels was not completely proven to be true, but that there can be some value for the determination of its aboutness.

- The results of the case study showed that, from a subjectivist perspective, users respond to the stimuli of Ranganathan's facets and propose some terms that, if consistent, could assist in the indexing and retrieval of fictional Literature.
References

Thank you.
Patrícia de Almeida, Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal) | mebpatricia@gmail.com
Mª Graça Simões, Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal) | gsimoesuc@gmail.com
Daniel Martínez-Ávila, Universidade Estadual Paulista (Brazil) | dmartinezavila@gmail.com