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Intellectual history, history of ideas, and subject ontogeny

Abstract
Outlines the general methodological stances in subject ontogeny research through examination of work in intellectual history, history of ideas, and in the philosophical commitments of realism, conceptualism, and nominalism. From this we can construct a rich vocabulary that allows us to differentiate kinds of subject ontogeny work through these descriptions of methodologies.

Introduction
In the context of subject ontogeny research, that is, the study of how subjects change or do not change through revision of indexing languages, there a number of methodological questions. The nature of semantics, ideas, and subjects is a long and rich discussion in the context of knowledge organization (Ranganathan 1967; Wilson 1968; Foskett 1969; Hjørland 1992; Mai 2001; Olson 2002; Zeng, Zumer, and Salaba 2010; Dutta 2015). This discussion is kept current by Birger Hjørland’s reference work on the matter (Hjørland 2017). However, the discussion predates the founding of the discipline of library and information science. Ranganathan cites the early Vedic work (fl. 1500-600 BCE) on subjects (Ranganathan, 1957). Plato (c. 380 BCE) lists those subjects that are required for a good education of future leaders and contemplates their nature (Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2013). Following Plato’s dialogues the Western encyclopedists, and ultimately bibliographers, write subjects into their work, sometimes reflecting on them, but often not (c.f. Diderot and d’Almbert 1751-1772).

Our contemporary preoccupation with subjects and how they remain the same or change is linked directly to our philosophical assumptions. In this context we often talk about two extremes: realism and nominalism (Boswell 1986). Realism considers subjects (categories, ideas, semantics) to be “the footprints of reality… they exist because humans perceive a real order of the universe and name it” (Boswell 1982 p.91). The nominalists subscribe to “the belief that categories are only the names… of things agreed upon by humans, and that the ‘order’ people see is their creation rather than their perception” (Boswell 1982 p. 91). The middle way, conceptualism, places universals and abstract objects in our minds, and leaves the relationship between these concepts in the mind and the world outside our minds as a matter of debate or camp (McLear 2014).

There are refinements and caveats to these two extremes, including a middle way in conceptualism (cf. McDowell 1994; McLear 2014). Further there are different and various ways realism or nominalism manifest (e.g., in the mind, external to the mind, in action, or in culture). Proponents of nominalism do not admit to the existence of
universals or abstract objects where “a universal is something that can be instantiated by different entities and an abstract object is something that is neither spatial nor temporal” (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2016 no page numbers given).

There are nuances to these camps. It is possible to hold a realist position and assume the same phenomenon is named differently in different context and in different points in time. And here is where the methodological question comes back to subject ontogeny work. Namely, does research done in one or the other camp use different methods to arrive at a description of how a subject changes over time in the life of an indexing language?

Because of our rich tradition within knowledge organization, and in the field of philosophy before, we can work within those contexts to find some answers, but to date, most of those discussions assume a kind of non-diachronicity to subjects, i.e., the reason we would change our indexing languages, to discuss subjects, would be to add new subjects, or to further refine the subject that was already present in the indexing language. The subject itself does not change in this case. It remains the same or is further specified. It is operationalized as a universal and abstract object as identified above.

However, we have a recent literature that looks at change (Fox 2016) or the lack thereof (Lee 2016), and builds on more than a decade of investigation into this topic (Tennis 2002). So if change is observed, what is changing? Is it the subject or the name or some admixture of the two? What ways can we make arguments for any of these three camps? This brings us to our discussion of the disciplines of intellectual history and history of ideas.

In a piece from 2012, Peter Gordon addressed the relationship between intellectual history and history of ideas. Of the former he said, “[b]roadly speaking, intellectual history is the study of intellectuals, ideas, and intellectual patterns over time. Of course, that is a terrifically large definition and it admits of a bewildering variety of approaches” (Gordon, 2012, no page numbers given). For this history of ideas, he says, it is a discipline “which looks at large-scale concepts as they appear and transform over the course of history. An historian of ideas will tend to organize the historical narrative around one major idea and then follow the development or metamorphosis of that idea as it manifests itself in different contexts and times, rather as a musicologist might trace a theme and all of its variations throughout the length of a symphony” (Gordon 2012, no page numbers given). He goes on, “[b]y insisting that the idea is recognizably the same thing despite all of its contextual variations, the history of ideas approach tends to encourage a kind of Platonist attitude about thoughts, as if they somehow preexisted their contexts and merely manifested themselves in various landscapes” (Gordon 2012, no page numbers given). In contrast, intellectual history “regards ideas as historically conditioned features of the world which are best understood within some larger context,
whether it be the context of social structure and institutional change, intellectual biography (individual or collective), or some larger context of cultural or linguistic dispositions (now often called ‘discourses’)” (Gordon 2012, no page numbers given).

In the history of ideas we see ideas as universals and abstract objects. In intellectual history we see particulars and spatiotemporal objects. As in history, in classification we rely on documentary evidence to construct a scheme for classification. This scheme can be seen as a document with rhetorical force (Feinberg 2011). Following Feinberg, one could argue that either explicitly or implicitly a scheme for classification is going to argue that subjects are universals and abstract objects or they are not. The work of subject ontogeny can either do justice to this authorial voice or not. What then, do the methods and results of subject ontogeny look like if they admit to different philosophical and by extension different historical views on subjects in long-lived schemes?

**Realism in subject ontogeny work: subjects as history of ideas**

As mentioned above, we have a rich history of discussing the nature of subjects in knowledge organization. Both materialist and rationalist conceptions of subject seem to share the idea that subjects are universals and abstract objects represented in schemes for classification. This seems counterintuitive, because the two are often presented as divergent epistemic stances in the literature (Hjørland 1992). However, if we take a view that the scheme for classification is a document, and we approach the reading of the document from the perspective of the history of ideas, we will need to be able to point to the same subject throughout time. That subject, as it is represented in the scheme is an *index* in the Peircean sense (Atkin 2013). That is, the class points to, or *indexes*, the subject. The subject can be postulated to be a universal or abstract object justified by an appeal to rationalism or the material nature of the subject.

In considering the adoption of this method of examining the ontogeny of a subject in a long-lived scheme for classification, we may or may not need to justify what we identify (index) as the subject. Our assessment of the identity of the lexical form in scheme may be enough. This has been the way Tennis (2012) has established his ontogeny of Eugenics in the Dewey Decimal Classification.

Like Gordon’s take on the history of ideas, the realist view of subject ontogeny work does not need to contextualize the subject beyond how the scheme characterizes it in relation to other subjects.

The caveat here might be in a materialist view of subject that, over time, is linked with various volumes in the literature. In this case we may see the subject, while constant, manifest in different texts. As noted by Tennis (2007), this could constitute a form of scheme change that may or may not reflect the ontogeny of the subject. While still realist in nature, if we consider the literature associated with subjects in schemes
for classification we move, ever so slightly, toward conceptualism or nominalism in subject ontogeny work.

Nominalism in subject ontogeny work: subjects as intellectual history

If nominalism is defined by the rejection of universals and abstract objects, then in order to observe change over time, classification theorists must contextualize the subject – not only in the scheme, but using other sources of evidence to follow their commitment to the fact that subjects, in the nominalist view, are particular and linked to other factors in space and time. In a radical appeal to nominalism, we might see research arguing that there is no single subject that changes through scheme revision. Following this each new scheme for classification, each new document, should be interrogated in its user and literary warrant context as well as within the structure of the scheme for classification. The researcher in this vein would need to bring in outside literature, and compare different slices of time when the subject was used to class literature.

This is not to say that a narrative about the subject could not be written to tell a story about how it moves from one version to another, but in each of these migrations, we would expect to see a recontextualization of the subject that might even require a redefinition. If we follow the intellectual history mode of inquiry, we would specifically call on the context of 1930s Indian civil engineering to interpret that subject in the earlier editions of the Colon Classification.

This mode of inquiry would precipitate a more robust description of what the researcher understands the subject to be in a given particular, spatiotemporal context. We would need a thick description – a *categorigraphy* of the subject and the class that represents it, in combination with literature and a particular kind of intellectual history that runs parallel to the time and space of the scheme for classification. This is especially true if we believe it to be a document with authorial voice and potential rhetorical force.

**Conclusion**

Subject ontogeny is an exciting and fruitful form of inquiry into many aspects of classification theory. Not only has it pointed to new design requirements for schemes for classification (and other indexing languages), but it also has laid bare some assumptions we have made about subjects and their stability. In this paper we have tried to point out at least two ways in which we can discuss change when we engage in a description of a subject’s ontogeny in a long-lived scheme for classification. We have more we can document, specifically on middle-way approaches like conceptualism. Further, while we may be able to continue with the methods we are currently aware of, more robust methods may need to be developed if we need to document context beyond the scheme.
References


