

Questions of Terminology and Classification in Digitising a Jewish Culture Heritage Collection

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Abstract:

In working toward a comprehensive computerised database of its collection, the Jewish Museum of Australia has been redefining its terminology and classification systems. These definitions have played a central part in determining inner relationships between collection items in an electronic environment, and thereby support the museum and the wide diverse range of communities searching the collection. Facilitating the multilingual requirements of the cultural collection is of high importance. This paper proposes to establish an online thesaurus for the international Jewish museums communities, in which they could name and identify their object's terminology.

Introduction

This paper discusses the importance of appropriate, culture-specific-terminology in the classification of a cultural heritage collection and the way it is being used in an electronic environment, using as my example a Jewish heritage collection. The following scenario will elaborate the topic of discussion.

A curator, who works on textiles, comes across the following object named 'Parochet'. Knowing it is in the collection of a particular museum, the curator logs on to the institution's online database, and, searching under the keyword 'Parochet', finds no such objects. The conclusion is, therefore, that either this museum does not in fact have an item of this sort in its collection, or that it does, but does not hold any online information about it.

Consider a third scenario. The museum does have such an object in its collection, and information about it is available online but is, unintentionally, hidden from the user. Catalogued using the term "Torah ark curtain", which is the English definition of "Parochet", the database failed to link the Hebrew word to the required item. Persistence is often the key to searches such as these, and the final results are surprising. The object is named "Torah ark curtain" and in brackets the name "Parochet" does appear. For someone who is unfamiliar with the ritual term or does not speak Hebrew, there is little way to make the connection between the terms. The scenario may become even more complex when we consider that there is more than one English transliteration option, on which I will elaborate later.

In working toward the development of a comprehensive computerised database of its collection, the Jewish Museum of Australia has been highly aware of these complexities. The development and use of a controlled vocabulary in a collection is a matter which becomes much more significant in an electronic environment. In such an environment, there are greater and broader levels of access to the collection once it is online. We will suggest possible solutions that support the development and use of consistent Jewish related terminology across different collections and institutions.

The Jewish Museum of Australia, a community museum that collects to preserve and tell the stories of the Australian Jewish experience, has a very diverse collection of 12,000 items, which includes ritual Judaica, Holocaust and Antisemitica, personal and family items, business and occupational memorabilia and contemporary art. Managing such a culturally-oriented collection requires the use of relevant specific terminology. In the Jewish museum, this terminology should be able to adequately describe and discuss ritual Judaica objects, Jewish holidays and festivities and other related cultural terms.

The museum has a range of users and communities that express interest in its collection. To make the collection easily accessible to them, as well as for in-house use, the Jewish Museum has started digitising its collection using KE EMu software. The project, which started in June 2004, has so far been internationally funded by the Pratt Foundation, Bachrach Trust, Claims Conference, Perpetual Trustees and Arts Victoria. The importance and benefits of the project are well acknowledged. Local and international communities would be able to access and search the collection online and there would be a valuable information exchange. This is important given that there are Jewish communities all around the world with a common heritage. But, as we saw in the example with which we opened this paper, the audience's access to the online collection, and the information available to them, is largely dependent on, and limited by, the museum's interpretation and classification of its collection.

Examining Classification Systems

Let us focus on re-examining the question of incorporating Jewish terminology into existing classification lists. In the preliminary stage of customising the KE EMu software to our collection needs, we asked ourselves questions about definitions of object types. Through the database, each object can be interlinked to other items in the collection, in both a physical and a historical context. The connections to be made are defined by the curators of the museum, and are then made available to the public as a given set of relationships. These relationships are determined by the social and historical context of the objects and by teasing out the significance of each item. For example, we have developed a set of key guiding markers such as ‘time of creation’, ‘creator’ and whether there is any relation to a specific historical or social/cultural event. Thus connections which are potentially significant to the researcher can be easily revealed. However, broader markers such as topics like death or Feminism will not be so specifically defined and users would need to be more independent in their search.

No two museum collections are the same, and it therefore follows that no generic software package will necessarily meet all requirements. Key considerations in choosing the software were the ability to function across the spectrum of collection management (loans, storage, conservation etc as well as cataloguing), the ability to deal with a multi-disciplinary collection, our desire to be able to offer as a long-term outcome different levels of online access to the collection for people from around the world – and the fact that key collecting institutions in Australia with whom we have professional relations were using it.

Customising the software to suit our collection was one of the first steps, and in our view the most important step, in the digitisation project. We talked to our colleagues at Museum Victoria about how they were using the software in Natural History and Technology collections, and looked at their customisations. We also considered the pros and cons of the cataloguing system we have been using for the last 15 years. An example of a change we made relates to the ‘Nationality’ data. For a community such as ours, with a significant Diaspora history, where borders have sometimes changed many times in one person’s lifetime, or where people have been stateless, we decided to discard ‘nationality’ and instead focus on city/town – at the time of the object’s own history. We also decided that sometimes the level of detail available through the software was greater than we would need, so discarded it. For example, the software allows detailed physical levels of description, which includes both Media and Medium for each item. For our purposes we decided not be so specific and to refer only to medium. Another example is the need to verbally describe the objects, to which we use the note tab. As part of this procedure we developed an internal user’s manual, which explains and exemplifies the ways in which we understand and treat the options available in the software.

The Jewish Museum currently uses a classification system developed through the now-defunct Museum’s Unit of the State government’s arts ministry, based on Chenhall’s (1978) “System for classifying man-made objects”. The system works – but it has no specifically Jewish terminology, and its language is formal and out of date. This paper is not intended to provide an indepth analysis of the Chenhall system but rather look at what opportunities arise as a result of moving to an electronic catalogue, such as the option to use terms in the classification system that are closer to everyday language so that lay users can search the records.

In her paper, Dunn (2000) points out that museums cannot predict what information their user needs nor the language and terminology in which they will request the data. These thematic gaps can cause users' inquiries to be left unanswered, or even supplied with the wrong answer. Fiona Cameron (2003) provides details about research on the needs of database users, which show that the ideal search interface should allow users to make their own connections and interpretations of the items, without constraining them to those of the museum, or even a curator.

The process we are following in the Jewish Museum acknowledges this gap and tries to work towards solving it. But we wanted to go one step further: we wanted to ensure our collection was being documented the way other Jewish collections were being documented, so that we could more easily 'connect' what we have to what is in other collections. We approached the international Jewish museum community through its online discussion group. We formed relationships with Jewish museums in New York, California, Basel, Berlin, Chicago and Israel. From this correspondence, it became clear that there is no existing, internationally-accepted and used Jewish museum classification system. Most museums devise their own list by combining their current system with the Jewish related terminology used in their collection. We therefore decided we had little choice but to do the same and have completed a first draft of such a combined system. This is now being carefully reviewed. Choosing this terminology will decide what the user can later access from their web search, and brings to light the question of translation, transliteration and the bi or multi-lingual database.

Transliteration and Bilingual Databases

The Jewish Museum of Australia's collection has its origins in many countries, and in cataloguing and documenting it, many languages are encountered - Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Polish, Czech, and English for example. Until now, our paper records have contained a direct transcription of the languages, as they are found in dedications, inscriptions, titles etc. In the context of the shift to electronic record-keeping, this practice has been reviewed and reconsidered. We have worked from the point of view that our collection is going to be more easily accessible to people around the world once it is online, and that the electronic catalogue offers many more search opportunities than paper records and manual searches, and so have decided to treat languages differently from now on.

We want to continue to transcribe what is written because this gives 'remote' access to the original text, and is therefore a primary source. However this is more complex when the alphabet of the language of origin is not supported by the software. This is a hurdle we still have to overcome. It is worth noting that when we chose EMu, KE was liaising with another major Jewish museum, in another part of the world, and advised that if that contract proceeded, they would be in a position to build Hebrew characters into the software. This did not happen, but there are a number of Jewish museums around the world using KE EMu, so it may happen in the future. Although this is a shortcoming, it is not so significant as to cause us to regret our choice of software.

We want to provide a transliteration of the language of origin, using the 'English' alphabet, and we set out to find a standardised, widely-accepted spelling for common terms such as place names, or ritual objects or observances. We want to provide a translation into English of any language of origin that is not English, because English is so widely used as a first or second language around the world.

The other issue is transliteration using the Greek Alphabet, which is an inseparable part of a Jewish heritage collection. How can access be provided for all of these languages in a single database?

Bilingual systems and databases do exist in museums – a prominent example can be found in Canada where the local Artefacts Canada search engine was integrated with the Getty's Art & Architecture Thesaurus, combining French and English terminology and supporting a bilingual search, as viewed on their website. (<http://www.chin.gc.ca/English/index.html>) The Israel Museum in Jerusalem has a similar bilingual database. This bilingual lexicon enables users and researchers to query data in either English or Hebrew. The Israel Museum is currently moving toward a comprehensive system of digital collection management which will be made available on-line in both English and Hebrew. (<http://www.imj.org.il/imagine/about.asp>).

KE EMu, however, does not yet support the use of Hebrew script, and therefore a similar Hebrew-English database system is not currently available. So in the short term at least, an alternative transliteration system had to be incorporated. There are several transliteration possibilities for Jewish related terminology into English, and others again into other languages. An accepted, authoritative form would be the one used in the Encyclopaedia Judaica. However, on closer examination of this option for an on-line database, it becomes clear this system cannot be fully incorporated into KE EMu. One of the reasons is the use of symbols that cannot be read by the software, which as far as we know does not support Unicode. For example the guttural Hebrew letter הּ is written in the Encyclopaedia as an h with a dot above it. This form is not available in the collection software and will not be available either to many of the future users of the online database.

There is no straightforward agreed-to alternative transliteration option, but several options are used by different museums around the world. For example, the Hebrew word הַכִּוּנָה, which is a nine-candle lamp used in the Jewish festival of Chanukah. Both these terms have several transliteration options: with a CH – Chanukah; with an H – Hanukkah; these two versions also appear in some places with a double k or double n. How would a user know under which term to search?

More complex is the case where an additional English term is accepted, for example the Jewish wedding canopy, which is a cloth covering held aloft on poles above the bride and groom in the marriage ceremony. These are likely to be found in Jewish heritage collections, but under which of the following terms should the user search: English - Canopy, Ch – Chuppah, or with H – Huppah; the latter two options can also be found with one 'p'. There are many more examples: Marriage Contract or Ketubah / Ketubbah; Hanukkah Lamp or Hanukkiah / Hannukiah / Chanukiah / Channukia; Torah ark curtain or Parokhet / Parochet; Torah Finials or Rimonim. While these examples relate to ritual Judaica, similar options apply to all names of people, places, political and social movements that are in Hebrew.

Some institutions have decided to use the English terminology as the primary entry whenever possible and add in brackets the Hebrew transliteration. However, there is no way of knowing on which terminology system a specific collection is based, and many times users may be left with their queries unanswered.

As Dunn (2000) concludes, no vocabulary standard exists that would meet the needs of all museums. However, by looking closely at a culturally-specific collection, the need for such a

standard becomes more obvious, and more achievable. With electronic and international access, the collection of an individual museum, its management and its classification system are much less likely to be operating in isolation. In order to provide effective communication between museums and their users, whether professionals or the general public, some action needs to be taken to bridge the language gap.

Conclusion and Suggestions for the Future

To conclude, we would like to put forward a few recommendations. The establishment of an international working group to oversee the development and implementation of a controlled Jewish related vocabulary might seem the most obvious path but it is probably not realistic, especially given the disparate nature of the museums and libraries around the world. There are other starting points to work toward standardising Hebrew, Yiddish and English terminology.

One solution could be the development of an online multilingual Jewish-culturally-specific thesaurus for museums and libraries world-wide. This could be a website that would present an expansive listing of Jewish-related terminology: every word would appear with its Hebrew term and as many transliterations in one language as are known. Such a system would serve the museum and library communities as well as general users. This would also provide curators and registrars with a comprehensive system that could be incorporated into the in-house classification one. Assuming every institution adopts its preferred but consistent system, which they could name in their searchable database; users would then be referred to the collective online vocabulary list for the terms under which they could search the collection. For the broad and diverse users of such collections, this would assist with attaining accurate results.

While such an online system does not exist, institutions with Jewish archives could act on standardising the classifications and terminology they use in two ways. The first is to use English words where possible, to prevent too many variables in the searchable possibilities. Chanukiah, could therefore be referred to as “Chanukah lamps”; Parochet, as “Ark Curtains” and Chuppah as “Canopies” (each in its plural form). This, however, still does not solve the variables in the English spelling of the transliterated word. Moreover, collection management software should integrate a multilingual function, such as Unicode, which relates to Hebrew or indeed, any other language other than English, as appropriate. Currently, KE EMu does not have such support. However, if there were enough demand then this could change. What we suggest here is not the development of a controlled vocabulary; rather, developing a sort of lexicon as a guide to aid in searching without limiting the number of terms.

This paper gives just one example, based on a Jewish heritage collection, of the complexities of incorporating multiple languages in classification schemes and online databases. If, however, museums, libraries and other archives around the world, and particularly in Australia, are to be truly accessible in a culturally and linguistically diverse community, they should take steps to make their collections searchable using languages other than English. But perhaps more importantly, each institution should be true to the nature of its own collection with its linguistic requirements, considering them in establishing its online database.

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