

Navigating and Expanding the MLA International Bibliography

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Let me begin with a disclaimer. The remarks that follow constitute what I hope is a constructive critique of the MLA Bibliography. The MLA staff do an impressive job in running this massive enterprise and the results are a tribute to their professionalism. My comments are intended to throw light on aspects of the Bibliography that are as problematic for them as they are for us, and my intention is to raise some questions that we all need to answer collectively.

Introduction

Classification systems resemble languages in certain respects. When Peter Mark Roget first contemplated his *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, published in 1852, he turned for his classification system to the work of John Wilkins, whose *Essay Towards a Real Character and Philosophical Language* first saw the light of day in 1668, the same year in which *Paradise Lost* was published. Wilkins's work was an attempt to create a language on *a priori* philosophical principles, in which all concepts and ideas were classified into a single system, with divisions and subdivisions, each denoted by a sign. The whole philosophical system could then be articulated into a language.

The problem, however, was time. Apart from the difficulty of learning it, Wilkins's language provided a snapshot of knowledge as it was understood in the pre-Enlightenment years: it could not be adapted to thinking about the world in a different way from the way in which Wilkins conceived it: it could not change with the times. Once the system was put in place, it could expand, but it could not adapt. When Melvil Dewey created his Decimal Classification system, he looked back beyond Wilkins to Bacon's efforts to classify knowledge (Dawe 1932:162), but, while he anticipated adaptations of his system, it also proved rigid and hard to adapt to new ways of classifying phenomena.

So classification systems resemble languages in that languages are systems for the storage of knowledge and are capable of expansion, but they are unlike languages in that languages constantly change and adapt to changing circumstances. One fundamental linguistic truth is that languages change through use. Although they retain meaning through past usage, they jettison what is no longer needed and they innovate to describe what is new, or newly thought.

History and Growth

The great strength of the MLA Bibliography is that it constitutes a huge repository of information accessible through indexing; but its great weakness is its relative inability to adapt.

While the system has expanded over the years, and computerization has made it far more searchable, it is based on principles largely arrived at many years ago, and arrived at, I suspect, less by design than by custom. Before the computer changed everything, it was originally intended simply as a compilation of current work in philology – in languages and literatures – an annual issue of *PMLA* that could sit on the researcher's shelf for immediate reference. From these simple beginnings it evolved into a data base of massive complexity.

From 1966 to 2006

The bibliography for 1966, for example, contained some 21,000 entries and weighed 3 lbs. It was divided into sections: *Festschriften* and other analyzed collections, general and miscellaneous (which included a short section called "Oriental and African" for both linguistics and literatures), English, American, General Romance, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Germanic, and East European. English and American were divided by century (subdivided by genre and author, and with a linguistics section at the beginning, and "Canada, Australia etc." thrown in at the end of the English section). French followed a similar model, but with "Canadian literature," "Haitian literature" and so on included in separate sections under the relevant century. Portuguese and Brazilian literature were listed separately under Portuguese. A similar principle was followed for Spanish. The Germanic section began with German, then a brief section on Americana Germanica, then "Netherlandic Language and Literature" with separate sections for Frisian and Afrikaans; then Scandinavian, duly subdivided. East European ran through the major Slavic languages, ending with a section for "non-Indo-European" consisting essentially of the Finno-Ugric languages. The bibliography was compiled primarily from a master-list of periodicals, a system that continues down to the present.

In the following year, the bibliography for 1967 was reorganized to separate linguistics, occupying the first section, and literatures, occupying the second. An innovation was the introduction of a brief section called "Oriental and African Literatures" and, in the linguistics section, a section called "Non-Indo-European Linguistics" that included the languages of the rest of the world, not just those of Europe. Thus these languages and literatures moved out of the miscellaneous category and into fuller view.

The bibliography for 1969 assumed the three-volume division that remained standard for a number of years: Volume 1 covered English and American literatures, along with additional sections for the various Commonwealth literatures, Welsh, Irish, Scottish, Manx, and Neo-Latin, and also including General Literature at the beginning. Volume 2 covered the other European literatures, along with what could be broadly described as non-European literatures, and Volume 3 covered linguistics. Entries had grown to 30,000.

The expansion continued. The year 1977 brought on-line retrieval, and by 1980 a printed version of the subject-index was added to the more traditional author index. Other innovations followed. The 2006 bibliography contained 71,870 entries in five volumes and weighed around 15 lbs., including the subject index. Today, the printed version of the bibliography has taken second place to the on-line version, with its data base covering multiple years, expanding both forwards and backwards in time as earlier bibliographies are entered into the data base and the onward march of compilation continues into the future.

Causes of growth

The growth in numbers of entries is attributable to several factors: a more thorough penetration of the fields traditionally covered, the productivity in those fields (there is simply more material being published than there was forty years ago; there are more periodicals, the periodicals are bigger, monographs continue unabated), and the expansion of coverage into new fields (the teaching of language, for example). Thus the bibliography is becoming potentially more valuable to its traditional users and increasingly valuable to new categories of users – and although historically the bibliography was conceived as an aid to the MLA membership, over time it has become a reference tool of far vaster application which MLA members happen to have access to. It has crowded out much of the competition, at least in the fields of literature. Given that it is also a commodity, whose sales help to sustain it, the question of how it can reach new audiences becomes a matter of some importance – and also because other options are less and less available.

Navigation

Literatures: geography-based or language-based?

Before examining the question of expansion, let us look at a few of the problems associated with the compilation of the data base over an expanding arc of time. Fashions change, interests change, but there is a built-in conservatism to the enterprise necessitated by the desirability of retrieving information in reasonably consistent form despite widely differing publication dates. The bibliography shows all the stresses and strains that one might expect of a system that has simply grown from its early philological origins. The earlier volumes struck an uneasy balance between classification by language and classification by country (caught, Herder-like, in the European paradigm of one nation / one language). Thus the French chapter contained a section on French linguistics, as though the designation “French” were linguistic, but separate sections on Canadian or Haitian or Guadeloupien literatures as though the designation were geographical, with metropolitan France in one list and the other primarily Francophone literatures in separate lists. This uneasy distinction continues down to today: Canada straddles two volumes, with something called “Canadian literature” in Volume 1, and “French Canadian Literature” in Volume 2. On the other hand, the literature of French-speaking Belgium and of Suisse Romande is classified under French literature *tout court*. Particular difficulties arise with linguistic minorities or with colonial literatures. What do we do, for example, with Salman Rushdie, long living out of his own country and writing in English? Citations for chapters on Rushdie in volumes entitled *British Fiction Today* and *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction* turn up under Indian literature. And the particular problem of diasporic, non-geographically-based languages, like Yiddish or Esperanto, leads to odd solutions: Singer is firmly ensconced, Yiddish and all, under American literature. An author like Ferenc Szilagyi, who wrote in Esperanto and lived in Hungary and Sweden, essentially defies categorization: his short stories in Esperanto written in Sweden seem incongruous among the works of Hungarian literature, but as a writer he no more belongs to Sweden than he does to Hungary. This too is a problem of long standing: Werner Sollors and others have pointed out that American literature

has always had, and continues to have, multilingual roots (Sollors 1998), and what is true of the United States is true, to a greater or lesser degree, of pretty much all literatures. And why make a distinction between a Scotsman writing in English and an Englishman writing in English when we do not make a similar distinction for Belgium and Switzerland in French?¹

The problem of peripatetic writers

But such problems have grown in recent years because of the increase in the mobility of writers. Henry James and T. S. Eliot, with their untidy impulse to wander across borders, have always caused problems for literary historians, but today such perambulatory writers are increasingly common. Isaac Bashevis Singer or Jerzy Kosinski or Vladimir Nabokov essentially left one country in favor of another and they have all ended up classified by the MLA with the literature they wandered into. But Joseph Brodsky, Poet Laureate of the United States in 1991-92, who wrote in both Russian and English, is firmly located in the Russian twentieth century as Brodskii, Iosif Aleksandrovich, presumably because he was firmly established as a major Russian writer at the time he left. Samuel Beckett is classified as French rather than Irish. And of course there are other writers who live permanently in more than one country and more than one language. Isabel Allende comes to mind. In truth, the old markers of national identity are increasingly inadequate to describe the mobility of today's writers.

The concept of national literatures

Furthermore, the very concept of nationality and of national literatures means less and less, or is at least undergoing a process of redefinition in a globalized world (as Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have recently pointed out in their conversation *Who Sings the Nation-State?*). In fact the concept was never as useful as literary studies sought to make it in the first half of the twentieth century: it was always close to meaningless for much of medieval literature, for example, and the postwar rise of comparative literature tended to undermine its relevance, while comparative literature's subsequent decline, paradoxically, only confirmed that irrelevance.

Translation

Allied to these problems is the problem of translated literature. National literatures do not exist in isolation from one another, but intermingle, flowing into one another in part through translation. The existence of a translation of a major text in a given language may have a

¹ My fellow-bibliographer John Dillon writes (in a personal communication): "The Bibliography's geographic assignments of authors in Latin-language literature offer some pertinent examples. Is it really helpful to class a dissertation on Jerome's correspondence under West Asian Literature or an article on a poem by Priscian (chiefly active in Constantinople) under Italian Literature? Granted that the unfortunate Stephen Parmenius of Buda was Hungarian and has been adopted by historians of Hungarian literature as one of their own, is it really more important to class work on his three surviving texts (two poems and a prose letter), all written in sixteenth-century England in the context of Hakluyt's enterprises, in Hungarian Literature rather than in English Literature? Geoffrey of Vinsauf does get entered under English Literature but the name form used for him, 'Geoffroi de Vinsauf', suggests rather a Frenchman (in fact, we don't know his nationality)"

significant effect on the development of literature in that language. And of course some texts circulate in numerous languages. Tracking the influence of translation through the Bibliography is difficult, in part because translation tends to cut across the classification system.

The user of the bibliography will object that most of what I have been describing consists of paper problems – problems associated with obsolescent paper versions of the bibliography that are essentially bypassed by electronics, where we can readily pull together the writers who write in Yiddish or those who write in Esperanto (particularly if they do not write, inconveniently, in more than one language). That is true. So essentially the only caveat that we need direct to the user of the paper volume is that he or she not assume that the picture of a given literature presented by the section for that literature is complete.

Consistency of indexing

But the electronic version, for all its brilliance, raises its own problems. The rigidity of the classification system in the printed version is replaced by the awkward fluidity of the indexing system in the electronic version. Since systematic indexing was begun in the 1970s, scholarship has moved on, new terms have been invented, and the old terms have shifted their meaning. That the bibliography can shift to accommodate them is a positive factor, but it makes consultation of the bibliography over time a somewhat hit-or-miss process. For example, the phenomenon of intertextuality antedates the invention of the term, but if a scholar writing in 1960 discusses intertextuality *avant la lettre*, it will be hard to track this contribution down. Intersubjectivity, reader response, reception theory – all such newly coined terms imperil the consistency of indexing over time by introducing new ways of conceptualizing the same phenomena. I also suspect (if only from my own practice over more than twenty years) that more mundane classifications suffer semantic or definitional slides over time. Is the article that I am classifying dealing with syntax or grammar? Is it concerned with semantics or lexicography? I can always defend my classification, but I am fairly certain that it has changed, in part because of my own inconsistency (the indexing system is only as good as the indexer) and in part because of shifts in the field that cause subtle redefinitions of terminological boundaries. And as interests change, the indexer is moved to select certain descriptors over others. Thus we see the phenomenon of linguistic change rubbing up against Wilkins's unchanging philosophical language: the illusion of continuity masks significant shifts in categories and assumptions.

Range of topics

Given its title and its subject range, the scope of the bibliography is deliberately limited. A question that we constantly confront not only in this context but also in our professional lives generally is the question of the delineation of disciplines and subject areas. Not only are we faced with the fluidity of terminology in indexing, but we are faced with the very fluidity of our fields of study. Such topics as colonial studies or cultural studies are inevitably only partially covered. Perhaps the range of topics should be expanded, if we can define them adequately and if we can overcome the obstacles to expansion mentioned below – or perhaps there are other key bibliographical compilations with which the MLA Bibliography could share resources..

The Desirability of Expansion

The illusion of English-language dominance

Expansion of coverage is a desirable development not only because it broadens the potential audience for the bibliography, but also because it assists the traditional scholar to expand his or her horizons beyond the immediately obvious. It is helpful to know that scholars are writing about intertextuality in a wide range of literatures; it is also helpful to know what is being written on the subject in languages other than English. The indexing system allows us to pull this material together quite easily. It may also be helpful to know that there is material in languages that we are simply incapable of reading, in other words to know that the mere fact that something does not exist in English does not mean that it does not exist at all. In some fields, notably the sciences, this illusion is already well advanced. The major scientific abstracting services insist on receiving abstracts in English; thus a scientific text in French, if it is not also abstracted in English, will not appear in the service's data base (Sandelin & Sarafoglou 2004). When statistics on scientific productivity are compiled, they consistently show higher productivity rates for English-speaking countries because they are based, at least in part, on English-medium data sources such as abstracting services and citation indexes. Second after English-speaking countries are countries where use of English in science is widespread, like the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. Further behind them come countries with major languages other than English, because in these countries scientific texts still circulate in languages other than English. When lists of the world's leading research universities are compiled, the English-speaking universities naturally lead the way. What applies to the sciences applies also to the humanities: vast quantities of important texts circulate in languages other than English (in fields like linguistics, for example), but they fail to register in the English-speaking world and they surface less frequently in the MLA data base.

This anglocentric tendency, while it serves the traditional user reasonably well (implied linguistic imperialism aside), causes that user to miss important material, and renders the bibliography less useful to the non-native speaker of English in some other part of the world. Given the infinite expandability of the data base, it would seem to make sense to increase the coverage of foreign-language material, particularly to take in some of the major languages, like Chinese, or even some of the traditional European languages. On a recent visit to Japan, for example, I was astounded to discover the huge range of material in Japanese on sociolinguistics and language policy.

The non-English-speaking user

Of course, knowing that such material exists and that it is inaccessible to me might cause only frustration – or perhaps a degree of scholarly humility. Perhaps I might share a little of the frustration confronting the non-English speaker trying to make a mark on the international scene, with all the perils of slow reading speed, the need to have every piece of writing vetted by a native speaker, and so on. For such a user, it would be truly useful to be able to access the indexing system through languages other than English. If an expansion into other languages were tied in with translatability of the indexing system, so that non-English speakers could conduct searches as easily as English speakers, the bibliography would become, at a single

bound, truly international. If a Japanese scholar could search the index *in Japanese*, the incentive to include Japanese material would increase, and the bibliography would become easier for Japanese scholars, even with an imperfect knowledge of English, to use.

Obstacles to Expansion

Human resources

A major limitation on such multilingual expansion, or indeed on any kind of expansion, is the lack of human resources to do the work. The bibliography operates through a combination of staff bibliographers and field bibliographers, people like myself who engage in indexing voluntarily either because of some kind of compulsive anality or because we know that it is the only way to force us to read the material we are indexing. The maintenance of high quality in the final product is assured through our insistence that we see and handle the items we index, and through the rather strict criteria of acceptability that we apply. Thus, book reviews are excluded; self-published material is excluded; for the most part we include only print material. If we worked more extensively in languages other than English, our ability to inspect the materials, and to understand what we were inspecting, might decline.

Perhaps the best way to resolve the difficulties associated with quality assurance in foreign languages would be a systematic attempt to enter into partnership with scholarly organizations in other parts of the world, turning our essentially U.S.-based compilation into an international enterprise. This would help strengthen those sections of the bibliography even in languages of wider circulation, like Italian or Russian, and it would assist our colleagues in countries with languages of limited circulation to compile usable bibliographical material in those languages. Such efforts are in fact underway.

I alluded earlier to several limitations that we place on the inclusion of material: inspectability (ocular proof, to use Othello's term), no self-published materials, relatively little electronic material. I have discussed the first already. What about the other two?

Self-publication, and publication assumptions

The smaller the language, the greater the prevalence of self-published materials. Self-published texts in English, we may reasonably assume, are self-published because no one else will publish them. Thus, conventional publication is, if not a guarantor of quality, at least a protection against lack of quality, and excluding self-published materials from the bibliography would seem appropriate. However, even in English such a provision has its limitations: it can easily degenerate into the same problem that we confront in promotion and tenure decisions: the university presses are determining whom we award tenure to, rather than our own judgment about the quality of the work of our colleagues.² The problem is compounded by the fact that

² The Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion (December 2006, p. 56) states: "Lindsay Waters has observed that in the current system of tenure and promotion at research universities, humanities departments 'outsource' the substantive review of the scholarly work of their junior colleagues to university press readers.... As he points out, this process of external review serves to obviate the process of internal

the bibliography is based on a master-list of periodicals: work published in lesser-known periodicals (in a field in which new periodicals are coming into being all the time, and others are dropping from circulation) is less likely to make its way into the bibliography than that published in major journals. Again, we may argue that such is the shape of the profession, and there is little that the bibliographer can do to change it.

(I might add that the need to inspect materials, coupled with the difficulties of indexing long texts with any precision, and the general unpredictability of the book publishing field, makes for weaker coverage of monographs than of journal articles – an ongoing problem. In fact, the problem has an additional dimension: articles are likely to be indexed far more thoroughly than monographs, which may deal with a wide range of topics but are indexed as single items in much the same way as a note in *Notes & Queries* is indexed.)

But if the language is small, if it is unable to support a properly organized publishing industry, self-publication may be the only way. I am often frustrated by the need to exclude self-published reference works in Esperanto, for example: there are commercial and academic publishers that produce a wide range of books in Esperanto, but they can seldom afford to produce a large reference work of limited circulation. Again, one may argue that Breton or Sorbian are in as small demand as subjects of study as they are as means of communication – but that is of no help to the linguist who wishes to research those languages and wants to know what is available. Furthermore, if we believe in the desirability of multilingualism, the least we can do is support it in our own scholarly practices.

Electronic Solutions

Websites and electronic journals

The problem of what to do with electronic material is, of course, a still more important and immediate issue (though here, too, the really small languages are often well served by the Web but poorly served by print publishers). Currently the MLA is wrestling with the question of how to establish criteria for the inclusion of electronic journals (a beginning has been made, but it is only a beginning) and of websites. Such material is obviously more ephemeral than print material, and it also does not follow the criteria that we normally apply to print. How, for example, does the concept of self-publication apply to electronic materials and (perhaps more importantly) how reliable is it as a criterion for the exclusion of such materials? And can we be sure that the technology will not take some sudden turn in the near future that will render our new criteria obsolete?

Furthermore, what is useful on the Web is frequently not what is conventionally classifiable as finished scholarly work. One of the Web's greatest blessings is its very lack of definitiveness.

review: departmental committees behave as if they cannot or should not determine the value of their junior colleagues' work unless university presses deemed sufficiently prestigious have determined the value of that scholarship for them.... This disturbing overreliance on university press readers is not identical to the system of peer review, which depends chiefly on external referees chosen from a list of scholars in a candidate's field of study."

There are two scholarly journals, if that is the right term, on the Web in Esperanto. One is relatively conventional, and the materials that it publishes are little more than shadows of better material appearing in print. The other publishes work in progress, or work that, given its narrowness, would never get published in print at all, considering the paucity of print outlets in Esperanto. It is lively, provocative, and definitely more useful to me as a scholar than the other more “measurable” journal.

The user

And this brings me to a final, very important point. Virtually all of the observations that I have been making about the bibliography have been made from the point of view of the bibliographer. I have said little about the scholar using it. The reality is that we do not know enough about the ways in which the bibliography is used (though my fellow-panelist Emilie Ngo-Nguidjol, of the University of Wisconsin, has made a beginning), nor what other information sources are consulted by users of the bibliography. Eager to pour our resources into producing a bigger and better compilation within the parameters that we have created, we should perhaps spend more time validating our criteria against practical experience, by carrying out studies of our users and the results of their use. How useful is the bibliography, and how is it used? What works and what doesn't work? We are perhaps inhibited by nagging fears about the extent of that use, but only by knowing more can we improve the usefulness of the bibliography itself.

Also outside my scope is the possibility of adaptation of the bibliography to serve entirely different categories of users – undergraduate students, high-school students, and others. Nor have I addressed questions relating to increasing the availability of full text, the provision of abstracts, and the like. Obviously these additions would increase the bibliography's usefulness, and might bring about closer linkages with other forms of data-bases, such as JSTOR.

A bibliographic wiki?

Perhaps, given such factors as the rapid expansion of electronic materials and the desire to preserve quality by applying strict criteria for inclusion, and given, on the other hand, the need for the MLA to preserve an authentically useful service, we should consider creating a parallel electronic bibliography, a wiki to which our members could contribute bibliographical material on their own initiative. Such a system might include links to electronic materials, articles in journals not normally listed or easily missed, materials recorded as soon as they appear rather than months or years later. Such a bibliographical resource would not constitute competition for the bibliography so much as a useful quarry for materials (also for our bibliographers of course). Our members could turn to the formal bibliography for materials collected over time with quality in mind, and they could turn to the wiki to discover what was immediately current and potentially useful to them in the immediacy of the moment, fully aware of its varied quality and alert to its limitations. As a scholar working in the new electronic environment of the 21st century, I believe that I need both and that, increasingly, the MLA International Bibliography cannot be expanded or stretched to cover both needs. Perhaps, to go back to the analogy of language, we can no longer manage a monolingual approach: we must speak two languages – that of traditional print and that of electronic immediacy. And then translate the one into the other for the benefit of both.

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