

The Changing Terms in Sears: The Impact of Societal and Cultural Changes on Subject Headings

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This paper is about the impact of patron needs and wants on the terminology used in Sears subject headings and is based on research funded by a PSC-CUNY grant and a Samuel Lazerow Fellowship. Headings change over time, and words and concepts change over time. It is rare, however, that these changes occur simultaneously, or even near each other chronologically. The authorized headings used in subject headings lists do change, but the rate of change varies in relations to the changes in common vernacular or discovery of new concepts.

This paper focuses on changes in Sears subject headings in the areas of LGBT and how these changes have occurred in relation to changing topics. Two questions arise: what do these changes imply about changing society, and are these reflections truly correct?

Librarians are considered the keepers of knowledge. The very method in which this knowledge is kept can cause confusion, not only for patrons seeking knowledge held, but also for librarians unfamiliar with methods used in cataloging and classifying books. Changing terms, or terms that do not change and thus portray what today could be considered bias or prejudice, can cause confusion or even worse embarrassment in searching the vast knowledgebase available.

Patrons and librarians become familiar with terms used as subject headings and a change in terms can cause confusion for patrons searching for items in a field of knowledge they used to know the authorized heading determined by the creator(s) of the chosen subject heading list. Think about reactions to moved books or more generally if your favorite store remodels. The reverse is also true, in that there is significance in examining the terminology used for access to the knowledgebase by subject in order to determine the effectiveness of this representation of knowledge.

The pace of change causes confusion, such as what Miller and Terwilligar noted in 1983 when the heading *European War* remained for 70 years, while *Atomic* was replaced in less than 30 years by *Nuclear* where applicable.

Inconsistency in changing terminology does not give the librarian or patron a frame of reference to assist in helping to determine when a new heading might appear. While research has been done, such as by Berman in 1984, 1986 and 1992 on terminology used in LCSH, there has been limited to no research done specifically on terminology used in Sears. As Arlene Taylor noted in 1984, "Until recently, scant attention has been paid to general user dissatisfaction with the library catalog as an information retrieval tool" (p. 75).

This research project utilizes selected lists of Sears headings from the first edition in 1923 to the present 19th edition published in 2007 in order to trace the growth and change of the authorized headings for topics related to Jews, Judaism, Israelis and the Holocaust; and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) materials. The focus of the research thus far is the LGBT topics as presented in this paper.