**ABSTRACT: What and Where is Ambiguity in Categorization?**

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Categorization systems organize the world along various lines for various purposes. Classification is the most formal categorization practice, employing standards and rules to guide professional members of a discipline in assigning descriptions. Less formal categorization practices require similar transformations of observations of things into descriptions of those things but often rely on simpler tools for guiding the process.

My work focuses on ambiguity in categorization systems broadly, asking what and where it might be. I follow the work of critical knowledge organization scholars who have given attention to both pragmatic and ethical issues related to categorization in information systems. Much of their work has considered the impacts of classification on marginalized groups of people. It has tended to focus on the power of naming and issues of exclusion, tracing the wide gap between community approaches to self-representation and classificatory terminology or relationship structures. In exploring ambiguity more broadly, I hope to offer an approach that allows us to ask similar questions about a wider range of groups and items, both human and non-human. This approach also allows us to ask questions about cases where certainty may not be possible or desirable.

To anchor my research questions, I have developed a four-stage view of categorization work informed by library and archives practices, which I tentatively call a *chain of surrogation*. A visualization of this model is in progress. This model allows me to point to different kinds and sources of ambiguity and ask questions about who or what might be responsible for this kind of uncertainty. This model also attempts to disambiguate many terms that are used in knowledge organization, including *identity, representation, description, object,* and *resource.* The definitions I propose here are not meant to suggest that any of these terms should our could have only one meaning. Instead, they allow my work to proceed with consistency and clarity. As this model evolves, changes in the terminology may be warranted.

Categorization work starts with an item and ends with the description of the item that is recorded for later access. In the chain of surrogation, we suppose that initial *item* is examined to determine its *identity.* The identity must be matched to the *representation* goals of the system before one can arrive at a *description.* This process, which is usually performed by a professional, traverses the material and the conceptual. Ambiguity may be seen at each of these stages of categorization, as well in the end-user experience of encountering descriptions. Depending on where the ambiguity occurs or is experienced, there may be different approaches to its resolution—or, perhaps, preservation.

References

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