

Assignment 2: Categorization – Referencing Knowledge Resources in Linked Open Data

In this assignment we have been working with the biography of Joseph Bilé, an actor and activist from Cameroon, who is a part of “Dekoloniale” project's collection of life stories. The purpose of this assignment was to translate his biographical story to structured Wikidata. We started by examining the existing Wikidata page of Joseph Bilé (Q105336549), which only contained a few basic information about him and his life. With the context from “Dekoloniale” we identified a series of missing data fields which we afterwards structured into Wikidata. We added things like information about his birthday (13. September 1892), place of death (Cameroon), profession (actor), number of children (4) and information about his participation in the First World War. An important part of our work consisted of creating a new post for Bilé's father, James Bilé M'blue, who did not exist on the platform before we added him to Wikidata. We had to create Wikidata on his father otherwise we could not connect/link the two together. This relation was modeled through the properties father (P22) and child (P40) and therefore the connection between the two people now exists in both directions.

During the work, it became clear that in even relatively simple biographical information requires interpretation when translated into data. That quickly became clear when working with open, linked data it involves both technical and epistemological challenges. The first challenge was as mentioned the creation of his father, James Bilé M'blue, where we had to understand Wikidata's hierarchy to create a valid item and ensure that the relation was logically coherent. Another challenge was about the historical precession. According to Wikidata Cameroon was first established as a state in 1960, but Joseph Bilé died in 1959. That created a dilemma on how to represent a place that at the time of death existed under a different political regime. We then decided to register Cameroon (Q1009) as place of death to maintain recognition. But we see this as an example of how colonial and postcolonial timelines can create tensions in modern data models. A third challenge that occurred was regarding categorization. The biography mentioned that Bilé received military training at The Garrison in Menningen, but we could not find a fitting property in Wikidata to register as such a

“training place”. This deficiency showed that Wikidata's structure is not always able to accommodate historical and institutional forms that do not fit into today's world. “Classification systems always have other categories” (Bowker & Star, 2000). This shows that some historical details risk being left out when they do not fit into the existing structure of the data system.

Through the work it became clear, that the transition from text to structured data is never neutral. Every single registration is an interpretation where you choose which information to highlight. As Bowker and Star note, “a classification is not of itself an explanation” (Bowker & Star, 2000) This highlights that classification does not explain a life or an event but rather organizes information according to the logic of the system in which it is registered.

Data is therefore not just a technical result but an expression of certain knowledge structures and world views. This became clear in relation to colonial and postcolonial histories where many of Wikidata's categories is built in western understandings of states, institutions and professions. Enrolling Joseph Bilé in this system is therefore both an inclusive and a critical act. Inclusive because his story is now more visible and searchable, but also critical because the process reveled the limitations that exists in some data infrastructures.

This activity showed us how linked open data can function as a form of digital preservation. By structuring information in Wikidata you are contributing to data being reused and linked to other sources and exist independently of the original website. For example, if “Dekoloniales” homepage diapered in the future will parts of its content still be preserved and available through the relations that is registered in Wikidata. In this way working with open data also functions as a form of digital archiving of cultural heritage.

The work emphasized that Wikidata is a collective and iterative knowledge system. All edits are open and visible to others. This means that the work is never final but is part of an ongoing development where the users always can improve, correct and expand each other's contributions. This was

experienced both as a technical process but also as a collaboration across time and place where many small edits together create a complex global knowledge.

Overall, the assignment has given us a concrete understanding of how data structuring can function as a critical method. It requires both technical precession and ethical reflection. By translating Joseph Bilé's biography into structured data we have contributed to making an African and Dekoloniale Memory Culture more visible in a global digital context. At the same time, we have learned how even open and democratic knowledge systems like Wikidata still bears traces of the hierarchies and categories that were shaped by colonial forms of knowledge. This points to a need to not only decolonize the content but also the structures through which data is organized. This work has therefore not just been an exercise in data registration but also a reflection on how we though our data practices can contribute towards a more diverse and fair digital knowledge space.

References:

- Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (2000). *Sorting things out: Classification and Its Consequences*. MIT Press.