

Making cents of subjects

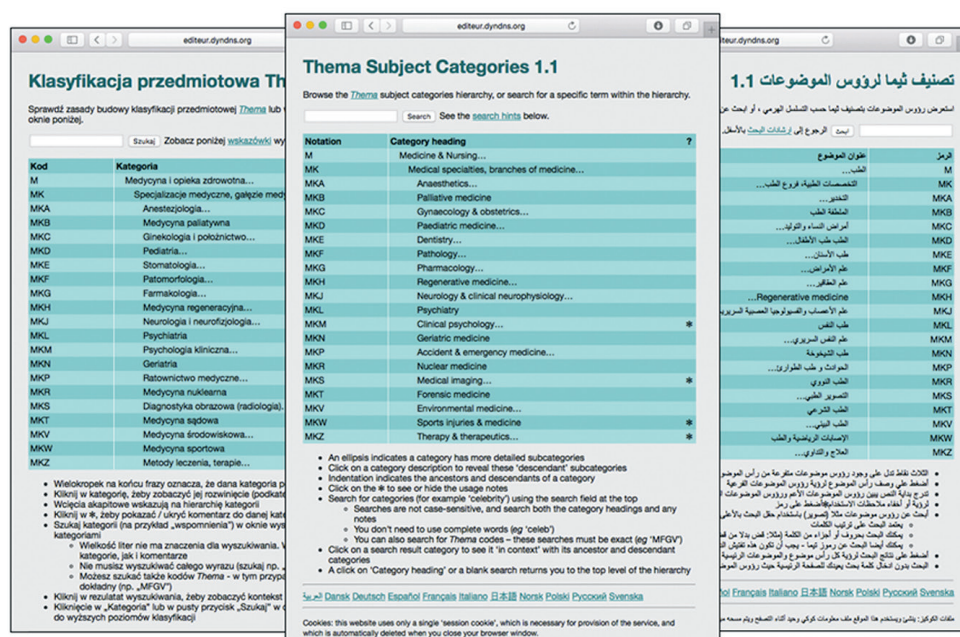
EDItEUR's *Graham Bell* outlines the merits of *Thema*, the international and multilingual subject category scheme aiming to enhance merchandising and discoverability, reduce duplication of work and boost sales across the global book trade

Thema, the international subject category scheme that aims to reduce the duplication of effort needed to support the plethora of nationally focused subject schemes in what is increasingly a truly global book trade, has turned two.

Launched in October 2013, *Thema* was born from an internationalised version of the well-understood BIC subject category scheme, but it's intended to be usable across the book trade in many countries. The differing approaches of BIC, the US-developed BISAC scheme, Germany's WGS scheme, CLIL in France, NUR in the Netherlands and host of schemes endemic to other countries, make subject coding one of the few elements of book metadata that is not easily interoperable between markets. *Thema* cuts through this, reducing the need for repeated scheme-to-scheme mapping, all the while improving data quality and saving time and money.

Like the BIC scheme, *Thema* is a hierarchy of subject categories. Each category has a code, plus a heading that describes what books assigned that code are about. MKE is dentistry, FFL is noir crime fiction, STC is snowboarding and (if you must) WFX is adult colouring books. *Thema* ascribes extra meaning to combinations of codes, and includes a range of qualifiers that can add important detail (noir fiction set in the 1960s, snowboarding in the Alps, etc). The codes are language-independent too: MKE is dentistry, but also dentisterie, zahnheilkunde, odontología, stomatologia, οδοντιατρική, 歯学 etc. Codes such as these, assigned by publishers to each book, are critical to improving merchandising, discoverability, market intelligence—and through these, *Thema* aims to enhance sales.

The *Thema* scheme has now been translated into more than a dozen languages. Some are available via an interactive browser¹



Thema enables subject categories to be transferable across languages; pictured are the Polish, English and Arabic equivalents

and others are being added. Mandarin Chinese and Turkish are imminent.

Simplicity is key

While it is explicitly a global and multilingual scheme, *Thema* encompasses the need for local detail in particular countries—detail that's not always required by the broader global trade—via national extensions. These extensions enable *Thema* to deliver the precision of a well-developed national scheme, while remaining relevant and simple for international use. Overall, *Thema* aims to be simple enough for publisher and retailer staff to use without extensive training.

Development of *Thema* is managed by EDItEUR², the London-based trade standards body for the global book, e-book and serials

supply chains, with which BIC co-operates closely. EDItEUR is also responsible for ONIX and a range of other standards, all of which are made available to use free of charge. Its work on *Thema* is guided by an International Steering Committee (ISC) comprising representatives from national stakeholder groups around the world. Through regular assessment and revision, the ISC ensures *Thema* meets the real needs of the business and remains responsive to change in the global market. BIC's Metadata Subcommittee is the UK stakeholder group, and Howard Willows of Nielsen is the current chair of the ISC. Its most recent meeting, during this year's Frankfurt Book Fair, resolved to begin work on a *Thema* revision and to target publication of version 1.2 of the scheme around April 2016.



Subject schemes such as *Thema* can drive in-store shelving schemes as well as “browse by subject” online

All grown up

Like any two-year-old, *Thema* is growing quickly. The German book trade has been a leader, with the recently launched VLB-Tix³ enhanced book metadata system being based around *Thema* rather than the older German Warenguppen-Systematik scheme—and offering lower prices for publishers whose metadata meets a required standard. Bibliographic data suppliers in Norway and Sweden were notably early adopters. A new Greek books-in-print database also has *Thema* at its heart.

In North America, BIC’s near-equivalent, the Book Industry Study Group, now maintains mapping between its own BISAC subject scheme and *Thema*, and BookNet Canada has developed an automated version of this mapping that can bring BISAC-coded backlists up to date with *Thema* almost instantly⁴.



About the author

Graham Bell, executive director of EDITEUR, is responsible for the overall development of the company’s standards and the management services it provides to other standards bodies. He joined EDITEUR in 2010, having previously worked for HarperCollins in the UK, where he led the development of bibliographic and digital asset management systems.

The major US-based global book and e-book retailers are voicing increasing interest, as *Thema*’s international approach matches their classification needs. And Canadian publishers are among the most enthusiastic proponents of *Thema*, as they are otherwise faced with using both BIC and BISAC (and possibly CLIL or Thèmes Electre in Quebec). As Willows stated during a session dedicated to *Thema* at Frankfurt⁵: “If you want to trade internationally, you need *Thema*.”

And what has happened in the UK over the first two years? Many publishers already have IT systems capable of using *Thema*, and some are routinely deliver-

ing *Thema* subject codes in their ONIX metadata to Nielsen, Bowker and Bibliographic Data Services. In turn, the bibliographic agencies can deliver *Thema* subject codes to retailers and libraries. BIC’s own subject scheme (at

version 2.1 since 2010) will not be developed further. *Thema* is, in every practical way, “BIC version 3.0”.

On the horizon

So will the “terrible twos” for *Thema* see storming tantrums, or a toddler’s growing capability and maturity? Previous attempts to promote global subject schemes for the book trade have foundered, but *Thema* has garnered broad international support, and has built a mature consensus that the minor compromises necessary to deliver a single scheme for the global trade are worthwhile.

Version 1.2 will add refinements and maybe a little evolution, but won’t change what’s already in place. The challenge for the next year is to capitalise on the promise and early success of *Thema*, and to continue to grow real use at publisher and retailer level. ✕

BIC delivers training for publishers on how to apply both BIC and Thema subject codes to its books. For more information, visit www.bic.org.uk/93/all-other-courses/

Footnotes & references

¹ editeur.dyndns.org/thema
² editeur.org/151/thema
³ vlbtix.de

⁴ links to these and other resources can be found at editeur.org/151/thema

⁵ EDITEUR’s International Supply Chain Seminar presentations are available at editeur.org/3/Events/Event-Details/301