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Introduction to *Thema*

Thema is the global subject classification scheme for books, audiobooks and e-books which has gathered wide international support. Forward-looking publishers, booksellers, intermediaries and service providers make use of the *Thema* subject category scheme as a part of their business process. This BIC Bite explains what *Thema* is, and why it's the ideal scheme for communicating book subject information with your trading partners.

Background

Subject classification is at the heart of merchandising, discovery, sales and market intelligence. Products in physical and online bookstores are searched or browsed by subject, and subject-based statistical information is vital to understand the dynamics of the book market. And yet, while the book market itself is ever-more global, subject classifications are mostly national – there are hundreds of different schemes around the world, and even within the English-language market, the schism between the BIC subject scheme and the BISAC scheme developed by the Book Industry Study Group means that many publishers double-up on work and cost, and retailers are forced to map (often very approximately) from one scheme to another. The need for a single scheme usable by the trade in all countries is obvious.

Origin, aims and development of *Thema*

Thema began with a BIC project that aimed to 'internationalise' the BIC subject scheme. While this attracted limited support, it opened the way for *Thema*, a more ambitious project that was launched in October 2012. *Thema* took an 'internationalised BIC' as its starting point and added both novel concepts and ideas from classifications used in many other countries. The first version of the *Thema* subject classification scheme was published in November 2013. The scheme has grown and matured through six subsequent updates, and the latest version 1.6 was released in October 2024.

Thema aims to be global in scope, cross-cultural and multi-lingual, applicable to all parts of the book supply chain, and flexible enough to allow each market to retain its unique cultural voice, while remaining a unified and simple-to-adopt standard. It can be used alongside existing national schemes like BISAC (USA), WGS (Germany) or CLIL (France), and may eventually replace some or all of them.

Thema is developed and managed by EDItEUR (the organisation that also develops ONIX), with guidance from an international committee of representatives from more than 15 countries including the USA, UK, Canada and many European countries. Groups in Japan, Korea, South Africa, Australia and Latin America are also involved. To keep the scheme up to date, EDItEUR aims to revise it once every two years, and to date, each revision has been fully back-compatible with the previous version (which minimises the work needed from implementors).

Structure of the *Thema* subject category scheme

The *Thema* scheme is a set of around 3000 subject categories, used to describe what a book is about –whether it is a children's book, a novel, or about the history of art, dentistry, cooking or whatever. The categories are arranged in a hierarchy, with 20 top-level broad groups, each subdivided into many sub-categories. Each category has an alphanumeric code and a descriptive heading (e.g., 'AGA' and 'History of art'), and many categories have associated usage notes. Each book can be assigned one or more codes as required.

Thema subject category codes can be enriched by adding qualifiers, to refine the meaning of the main subject headings. Qualifiers cover geographical areas, historical periods, languages (that is, the language that a book is *about*, not the language it's written in), educational purpose, artistic styles, and special interests (eg, a particular seasonal interest, or suitable ages for children's books). For example, a usage note with AGA, History of Art, suggests the addition of artistic style, geographical place and historical period qualifiers, so the subject

of a particular book about the history of art might be narrowed to a history of the arts and crafts movement in late 19th Century England (the metadata should include *Thema* codes AGA plus 6AF, 1DDU-GB-E and 3MNQ).

If you already use the BIC subject scheme, the hierarchical structure of subjects and qualifiers of *Thema* will be very familiar. Given its overall similarity, it may be best to view *Thema* as ‘the new version of BIC’. But as well as a detailed set of subjects and qualifiers, *Thema* has ‘national extensions’ – extra qualifiers where there’s a need to add an extra level of detail for specific countries or markets. These are arranged so that if the country-specific extension is stripped off the code, the resulting qualifier still makes sense. 1DDU-GB-EA (East Anglia) can be stripped back to give just 1DDU (United Kingdom) for users – particularly those outside the UK – who do not require the level of local detail provided by the extended code.

The headings for subject categories and qualifiers are all defined in English, but are also available in many other languages. The meaning of a particular code is the same, whichever language the heading is expressed in. So the code MKE is Dentistry, *Zahnheilkunde* (German), *Odontología* (Spanish) or طب الأسنان (in Arabic). This multi-lingual approach demonstrates that *Thema* is intended for *global* use.

How can I use Thema?

Thema can already be used within an increasing number of the off-the-shelf product management applications from leading IT vendors. For publishers and retailers with an in-house IT system, implementing *Thema* is similar to implementing the established BIC subject scheme. *Thema* is free to use, and you can explore the category hierarchy via the online browser (<https://ns.editeur.org/thema>).

Once assigned, *Thema* codes can be embedded within industry standard ONIX metadata:

```
<Subject>                                <!-- ONIX 3.0 or 3.1 -->
  <MainSubject/>
  <SubjectSchemeIdentifier>93</SubjectSchemeIdentifier> <!-- 93=Thema, see List 27 -->
  <SubjectSchemeVersion>1.6</SubjectSchemeVersion>    <!-- version 1.6 -->
  <SubjectCode>AGA</SubjectCode>                    <!-- history of art -->
</Subject>
```

Thema codes for backlist titles can be assigned by mapping from existing BIC or BISAC subject codes. Standard mappings are freely available from the [EDItEUR website](https://www.editeur.org/151/thema). However, mapping is never quite as good as manual classification, and ideally, commercially significant backlist titles should be classified ‘manually’. A ‘reverse’ mapping – from *Thema* to BIC – is also available from EDItEUR, and a reverse mapping for BISAC is available from Nielsen. Reverse mappings allow an organisation to do its primary frontlist categorisation using *Thema*, and to provide mapped ‘legacy’ subject codes automatically while that remains necessary.

Thema has now replaced BIC subject codes

It is not a specific aim of *Thema* to replace existing national schemes in the short term. However, adoption of *Thema* has grown rapidly across many countries, including in Germany, France, Spain, Scandinavia, Japan and elsewhere, and *Thema* has already replaced some earlier schemes within the trade and in national ‘Books in Print’ systems. In the UK, BIC has strongly recommended migration to *Thema* since 2017, and the former BIC subject scheme was declared ‘obsolete’ in February 2024. UK and Irish organisations that relied in any way on the BIC scheme should have transitioned to *Thema*, and use of *Thema* is mandatory within BIC’s Metadata Excellence Award (MEA) scheme. UK retailers including Waterstones support *Thema*, it’s used by Kobo, and Amazon’s ‘browse by subject’ is based closely on *Thema* across its stores.

Further Information

There’s lots more information available about *Thema* via the EDItEUR website – all the main *Thema* resources are free of charge from <https://www.editeur.org/151/thema>. BIC members can raise questions about *Thema* with the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee or via EDItEUR’s *Thema* e-mail discussion forum (subscribe by e-mail to thema+subscribe@groups.io), and more information is available on our website at <https://bic.org.uk>. BIC also runs a range of metadata training including in-depth courses on *Thema*.

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