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Book Review

On Retrieval System Theory, by B. C. Vickery, 1965; 191 pages. (London: Butterworths, 35s.)

The year that saw the publication of some of John Sharp's readably useful fundamentals of information retrieval can also add to its credit this particular second edition, and justifiably lay claim to two important contributions to the introduction and spread of the subject to an English audience. The points that separate the two editions of Mr. Vickery's work are welcome in view of the developments of the intervening four years, and are responsible for a considerable expansion, notably in the automation of storage and retrieval; descriptor languages and "thesauri"; file organization and coding; and the parameters, purpose and performance of retrieval systems—particularly costs and efficiency.

If a reviewer can be permitted the space to try to give an impression of technical knowledge, I will grasp at the one chapter in which the author encourages opinion, within a collection of factual scientific analyses. The 1959 Cleveland conference, which considered the possibility of a common language for machine searching, stimulates the author to stress the advantages of a universal tool—primarily in unifying document analysis by many abstractors throughout the world. The U.D.C. is cited as an example of the benefits of standardization.

There are detractors (the plural may be arrogant optimism) who feel that the universality of U.D.C. has become a jocular ideal because of the flexible demands imposed, and the "dialects" developed, by many special collections. One could pursue the U.D.C. analogy, to question the Cleveland conference, by suggesting that specialized documentation will encourage internal "thesauri" pertinent to each collection—even if a universal language does develop. This is a condition imposed more by the insular commercial world, than by pure and universal science; but it is mainly the commercial world that forces the development of information services, and the terminology of salesmanship is deliberately insular and purple. If not commerce, the stimulus is military. As an aside, I often feel that science has become the junction-box for guns or money.

Although Mr. Vickery writes that "the present era of specialization in retrieval will be succeeded by a synthesis, leading to the general use of a common interlingua"—it is possible that this very specialization will defeat the idealistic prospects of a universal language. An invaluable contribution

towards such a tool would be an accepted set of principles for compiling retrieval languages, in the same way that principles of classification exist as basic form for totally different pre-co-ordination schemes with exotically varied notation.

Although the text leads to relevant chapter references, it seems unfortunate that publishers are omitted in favour of location of press. A reference such as:

"R. A. Fairthorne. *Towards information retrieval*. London. 1961" does not lead helpfully to the "familiar and widespread form . . . that takes place in a library". This seems an approach of medieval science, determined to ignore the contribution of two centuries of commercial publishing. Mr. Vickery, of all people, should provide references that library and information staffs can service as quickly as possible. If references are authoritatively quoted, why should it be necessary to check them? May I plead for information retrieval *practice*? The inter-loans bureaux would bounce that one back, to the inconvenience of the waiting inquirer. Another point raised by the references lies in an occasional failure to check subsequent editions. Roget's *Thesaurus* is quoted with R. C. Browning as the editor. This can only refer to the 1952 Everyman edition of Dent. There is now the 1962 Longman's edition by R. O. Dutch. The Dent edition is now out of print, and it had no particular significance. If Roget is to be cited, then surely emphasis must be given to the first *or* to the latest edition?

This may be hair-splitting pedantry with which to tease such a recognizably standard work, but it represents points that separate one edition from another, and from a librarian's point of view, it is part of the frustration of information retrieval.

Apart from that mere quibble, the references have clearly been greatly expanded, weeded and pruned; and it is pleasant to note that all have been incorporated in the excellent index. (Any work on this subject should expect its bibliographies and indexing structure to be examined.)

One doubts if practical developments on this side of the Atlantic will remain static enough for Mr. Vickery to have four years in which to contemplate and draft a third edition—although it is safe to assume that his basic retrieval system theory will be relatively unchanged.

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