Library of Congress Subject Headings

Module 1.5:
Introduction to LCSH

Policy and Standards Division
Library of Congress
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History of LC Subject Headings

- Work began in 1898
- First edition was published in parts between 1909 and 1914
- Continually updated
  - New editions were published irregularly until 1988
  - Published annually since then
  - In PDF form only since 2014

Library of Congress Subject Headings is over 100 years old. Work on it began all the way back in 1898. The core of LCSH was *The List of Subject Headings for Use in Dictionary Catalogs*, which was published by the American Library Association. Catalogers checked off the ALA headings as they used them, and also annotated ALA's list when they had to make up additional headings. That list of headings became the first edition of LCSH, which was published in parts between 1909 and 1914. It has been continually updated ever since.

It was kept up to date by supplements and new editions that were irregularly published until 1988, when LC began to publish a new edition every year. This is still the case, but since 2014, the editions have been published only in PDF and are made freely available to the public on LC's website.

LC Subject Headings Today

• Access to up-to-date headings
  • Subscription-based
    • Classification Web
  • Freely available
    • LC Linked Data Service, http://id.loc.gov
    • LC Authorities, http://authorities.loc.gov

As I said, LCSH is continually updated. Specialists at the Library of Congress consider hundreds of proposals for new and revised headings every month, and the vast majority of those proposals are indeed approved.

The PDF editions are published annually, and are only snapshots of LCSH at a particular time. So, how can the newest headings be found?

Classification Web is LC's online subscription database service, which includes not only LCSH, but also the other vocabularies that are maintained by the Policy and Standards Division of the Library of Congress. It also includes access to the LC classification schedules and tables and to the LC/NACO Name Authority File. *Classification Web*, which is updated daily, is the best method for assuring that you are using the most up-to-date headings in your cataloging. It is also the interface of choice for those who wish to view LCSH in a format that is similar to that of the print editions; its layout shows the references, scope notes, and so on, as you would expect to see them in a controlled vocabulary. There are also several searching options built into the system.

LC also provides two options for free access to up-to-date terminology: the LC Linked Data and LC Authorities services. Records may be viewed for free in each service and even downloaded for free from the Linked Data Service, but in both of them, the layout does not depict a hierarchical format. Each of those services has its own update schedule.

LC's MARC Distribution Service also provides a weekly, fee-based subscription service for those who wish to obtain updated authority records that way.
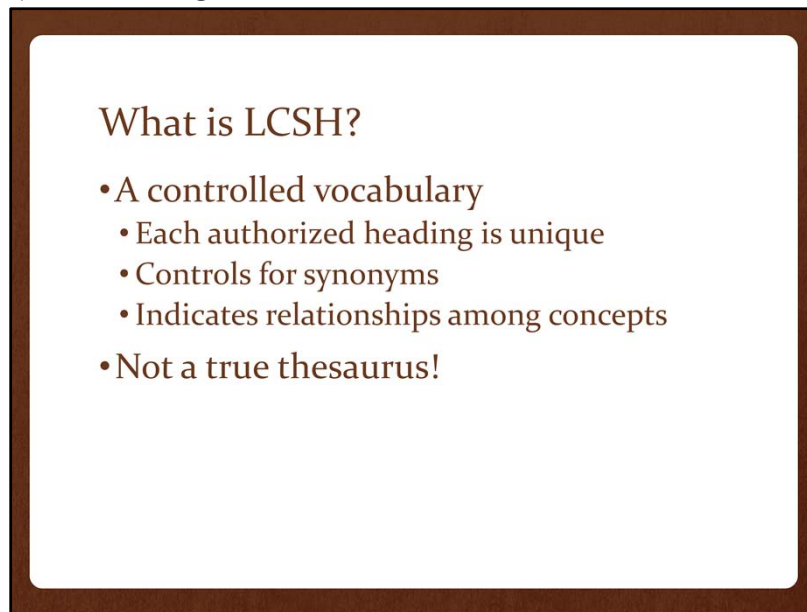
> ## LC Subject Headings Today
>
> - The most widely used subject vocabulary in the world
> - Has been translated into a dozen or more languages
> - Is the basis for many other vocabularies

LCSH has occasionally been called the granddaddy of library controlled vocabularies.

It is *the* most widely used subject vocabulary in the world, whether in the original English, or through the dozen or more translations that are available.
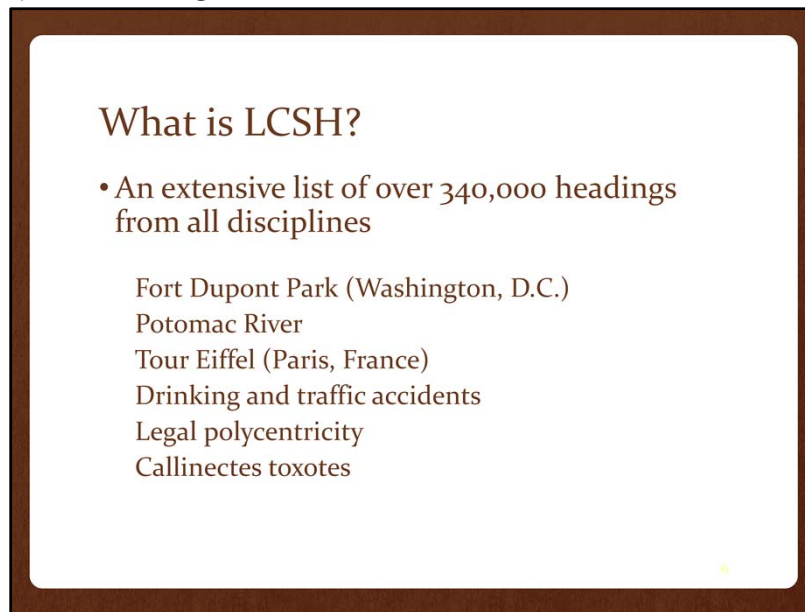
In addition, LCSH has been used as the model for many other vocabularies throughout the world.

What is LCSH?

- A controlled vocabulary
  - Each authorized heading is unique
  - Controls for synonyms
  - Indicates relationships among concepts
- Not a true thesaurus!

So what is LCSH?

As indicated in previous modules, LCSH is a controlled vocabulary. A single word or phrase is chosen to represent each concept that is included, and synonyms are provided as see-references to that heading. It also indicates relationships between and among headings.

It is not a true thesaurus, though, because for historical reasons it does not completely conform to the international standard on thesaurus construction.

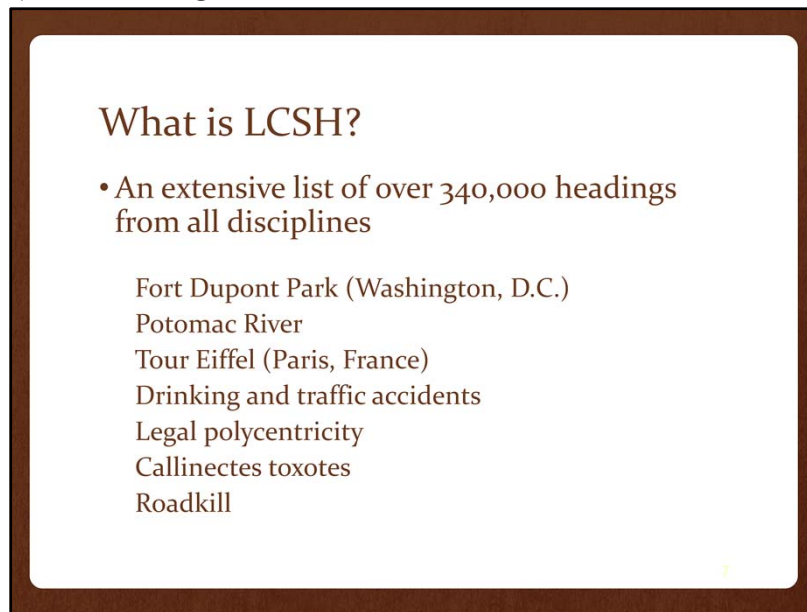## What is LCSH?

- An extensive list of over 340,000 headings from all disciplines

    Fort Dupont Park (Washington, D.C.)
    Potomac River
    Tour Eiffel (Paris, France)
    Drinking and traffic accidents
    Legal polycentricity
    Callinectes toxotes

It is a list of over 340,000 headings from every discipline.

It includes parks (for example, Fort Dupont Park in Washington, D.C.). It includes bodies of water, such as the Atlantic Ocean and the Potomac River. It includes buildings like the Eiffel Tower, and lots and lots of concepts such as **Drinking and traffic accidents**, and **Legal polycentricity**.

Callinectes toxotes is a scientific term, so it is in the scientific language of Latin. Can you guess what **Callinectes toxotes** are?   It's actually a species of blue crab.

What is LCSH?

- An extensive list of over 340,000 headings from all disciplines

  Fort Dupont Park (Washington, D.C.)
  Potomac River
  Tour Eiffel (Paris, France)
  Drinking and traffic accidents
  Legal polycentricity
  Callinectes toxotes
  Roadkill

My favorite heading of all time is **Roadkill**. I actually had to use that once, when I was a government documents cataloger. The resource was a study into why so many birds were being run over in one particular stretch of highway in Virginia.

It turns out that the berry bushes in the median were the problem; as the birds were trying to get some food, they were being hit by large trucks.

At any rate, there are all kinds of unexpected headings in LCSH; it's not just dry and boring academic stuff.

One of my other favorite headings is **Rogues and vagabonds**, just because it sounds so Victorian!

What is LCSH?

- Based on literary warrant
  - Headings are proposed as needed for new cataloging
  - Headings are based on usage in resources being cataloged and in reference sources

As extensive as LCSH is, though, there is no attempt to be comprehensive. Headings are based on literary warrant, which means that they are proposed only as needed for new cataloging. The Library of Congress does not go out and look for new headings to add; instead, as catalogers are working, when they find a resource that cannot be described with existing headings, they propose what they need.

Literary warrant also means that most of the proposals must indicate that research was done in reference sources. Depending on the type of heading being proposed, encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, newspapers, and so forth are consulted, either online or in print.

What is LCSH?

- Except when needed for subdivisions or references, LCSH does not contain
  - Personal names
  - Corporate names
  - Jurisdictional names
- Reside in the name authority file
- Most name headings may be used as subject headings

There are also large categories of headings that are not found in LCSH. This includes (but is not limited to) personal, corporate, and jurisdictional names. These are established in the LC/NACO Name Authority File, and *most* may be used as subject headings. Most titles and name/title headings may be used as well.

What is LCSH?

- An expandable system
  - Untold numbers of unique heading strings can be created on-the-fly
  - Catalogers follow explicit rules for constructing heading strings

In addition to the hundreds of thousands of headings established in LCSH and the millions of names and titles established in the Name Authority File, untold numbers of unique heading strings can be created on-the-fly by catalogers who follow explicit rules that are contained in the *Subject Headings Manual*, also known as the SHM.

Subject Headings Manual (SHM)

- Provides instruction on the establishment and assignment of LC subject headings
- Includes instruction sheets on general and specific topics
- Instruction sheet numbers are prefixed with an H (e.g., H 1156)

The SHM is the "user's manual" for LCSH, and it consists of hundreds of individual instruction sheets on everything from the general principles of heading assignment to instruction sheets on very specific topics, such as how to catalog a bio-bibliography or a resource on a legendary character. The instruction sheets have an alpha-numeric numbering system. Every number is prefixed with an H. Other manuals published by the Library of Congress have instruction sheets that are prefixed with *other* letters. Look for the H, and you'll be sure that you are in the SHM.

References to instruction sheets are provided throughout this training. We strongly recommend that you *always* review the instruction sheets, both while you are completing this online training and during the course of your regular cataloging work. The SHM provides invaluable information that will help you assign subject headings consistently and correctly.

Later modules will provide you with an in-depth understanding of what the manual contains, and how to search it for instructions pertinent to a resource.