

TO: Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR
FROM: Hugh Taylor, CILIP representative
SUBJECT: **Abbreviations in AACR3 – Principles**

Background

At the Cambridge meeting in October 2004, JSC requested CILIP to prepare a paper addressing the general principles surrounding the use of abbreviations in AACR as preliminary work to the possible revision of some or all of Appendix B.

In AACR2, most of the instructions regarding the use of abbreviations are given in Appendix B, although additional guidance is to be found elsewhere in the rules. It is important to note at the outset that AACR2 specifically notes (0.10) that the “instructions given ... are rules and must be applied consistently”, and that the only general provision for the cataloguer to exercise judgment or discretion relates to the limited areas covered in B.5, where abbreviations should not be used “if the brevity of the statement makes [them] unnecessary or if the resulting statement might not be clear”, and to B.13, where a similar statement is given.

There are 10 pages of possible abbreviations listed in App. B; their use is controlled both by the rules in B.2-B.5 and by footnotes further qualifying the use of Roman alphabet abbreviations listed in B.9. There are rules covering “Corresponding words in Another Language”, “Compound Words”, and “Inflected Languages” whose purpose, in effect, is to increase either the range of available abbreviations or to extend the use of those already authorised to terms not actually listed individually in any of the appendices.

Justification for using abbreviations

Although a comprehensive review of English-language cataloguing rules has not been attempted, surveying a random selection of rules used in the UK over the years shows that the use of abbreviations have always been sanctioned but never, apparently, justified. In the absence of such justification a certain amount of informed speculation is required. The following are amongst the more likely reasons why abbreviations came to be applied in cataloguing rules:

- To save typing/typesetting keystrokes – i.e., time and money issues
- To save space on a catalogue card or in a printed entry
- To reduce the scope for error in the catalogue entry (fewer keystrokes)
- To incorporate into catalogue entries conventions familiar from outside the library world
- For the convenience of the user – by making the presentation of an entry appear less cluttered and allowing the eye to skip over what are often relatively unimportant common words and terms

Overlap with other standards

ISO 832 (2nd ed., 1994) provides rules for abbreviation of bibliographic terms appearing in bibliographic descriptions and references in languages using Latin, Cyrillic and Greek alphabets. Of rather greater significance to AACR would have been ISO *Technical Report 11015*, which was intended to provide an actual a list of such abbreviations. However this project, after many years of work, was cancelled – significantly, for AACR3, on account of the cost of publishing and maintaining such a list.

CC:DA's Task Force on ISO Harmonization, in its final report dated Dec. 16, 2001 (available at <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/tas/jca/ccda/docs/tf-iso1r.pdf>), looked at a range of further ISO standards which cover abbreviation, symbolization and punctuation. From its conclusions it seems reasonable to infer that there is nothing of any significance for AACR3, apart from the continued use of ISO 4: *Rules for the abbreviation of title words and titles of publications* in the construction of “key titles”.

The draft of DCRM(B) – available at <http://www.folger.edu/bsc/dcrb/dcrmtext.html> – follows AACR2 in making no attempt to justify or explain the use of abbreviations. There are some deviations from the content of AACR2, as would be expected, but the general approach is largely the same.

Observations on the use of abbreviations

Abbreviations are scattered throughout articles in professional medical journals like confetti to the extent that, even within this enclosed world of well-educated professionals, guides to the abbreviations likely to be encountered in one's daily reading are now required. Library catalogues, by contrast, have no specific audience. Catalogue entries are now usually visible around the world, retrieved not just by those explicitly searching a specific database but increasingly encountered as results from the likes of Google and Yahoo. If once we might have argued that our “users” were those who had deliberately gone to the library (building) in order to seek out something in particular, or to look for information on a specific topic, and that those users might have a shared understanding of some of the conventions of the library, including its catalogue entries, we can no longer be quite as clear just who our users are or just how much prior knowledge of the library world they bring to their search for knowledge.

Whilst it may be impossible to avoid requiring a user to bring some understanding of catalogue conventions to his or her reading of our entries, rule makers must more than ever try to ensure that they place as few obstacles as possible in the way of those users less familiar with such conventions. Abbreviations not in common enough usage to be understood by the average user are going to be more of a hindrance than a help.

Although they have been compiled for different purposes from that of AACR, the caution expressed by major style guides on the use of abbreviations may be no less applicable to cataloguing codes.

“Abbreviations should be used as a convenience for the reader, not for the writer. In work for a general audience, do not use abbreviations or symbols in running text unless concision is vital – for example, where space is scarce in a narrow measure – or because terms are repeated so often that abbreviations are easier for the reader to absorb...”
(Oxford style manual, c2003, p. 62)

“Abbreviations should be used only in contexts where there are clear to readers.”
(Chicago manual of style, 15th ed., 2003, p. 558)

“Since abbreviations increase the possibility of confusion and misunderstanding, they should be used with caution.”
(MHRA style guide, 2002, p. 17)

“In choosing abbreviations, keep your audience in mind. While economy of space is important, clarity is more so.”
(MLA style manual and guide to scholarly publishing, 2nd ed., 1998, p. 255)

Just as vocabulary, grammar and spelling change over time, so does an audience’s understanding of the meaning of abbreviations. It is instructive to observe how abbreviations have dropped out of (and into) favour over the years.

The British Museum’s 1920 rules, for example, sanction 15 abbreviations for 26 separate words (exclusive of plurals which the rules state may also use the same set of abbreviations – i.e., there were no pluralised forms of any of those abbreviations). Only 9 of those abbreviations, standing in for 14 words, survive in the current text of AACR2 (a fifteenth, “vol.”, is sanctioned for use in specific circumstances).

Only 6 out of the first 12 general abbreviations in Appendix III of the British text of AACR1 are currently found in AACR2. Elsewhere, the abbreviation “hrsg.” (for “herausgegeben”), widely used and understood in the German-speaking world, has disappeared. (Another abbreviation dropped during that period is “app.” for “appendix”.)

Ideally, abbreviations used in records produced by today’s cataloguing rules should be amongst those used in the next century. Abbreviations included in our codes seem often to have failed to pass that test of time.

If librarians need evidence of the potential for confusion that the use of abbreviations can bring, then they need go no further than the conclusions of two studies carried out by Philip Bryant, then Director of the Centre for Bibliographical Management, Bath, England. In both of the studies, users were shown specific catalogue entries and asked to interpret them. (The findings, therefore, take into consideration only those abbreviations actually encountered in the subset of records chosen for the studies; in the case of the later study this comprised 12 records).

In a study carried out in the British Library’s Humanities and Social Sciences Reading Room and Official Publications Library in summer 1986, significant problems were recorded with the use of “v.” in the Physical description area. This recorded the highest

number of cases of confusion in the study, a total of 179 cases (unfortunately the summary of this study, *Serials*, v. 1, no. 3 (Nov. 1988), 44-45, fails to record the size of the total sample). The term “ill.” is also noted as being problematic. Bryant himself assumes “vol.” and “illus.” would be preferable, rather than eliminating the use of abbreviations entirely, but offers no evidence in support of this.

In a study carried out in 1992, and reported as *Use and understanding of the library catalogues in Cambridge University Library : a survey* (UKOLN, 1993), Bryant records significant misunderstanding (or total lack of understanding) of the use of “c” for “copyright”, and of both “Ib. “ and “id.” He concludes, inter alia: “If the information is important in specific instances, then it should be provided in a way that is as self-evident as possible” (p. 33).

Notwithstanding some of the foregoing, there are clearly situations in which abbreviations that are not *generally* understood might be permitted limited use within the rules. Any English speaker with an interest in classical music who wants to know the forces required for a particular vocal or choral work is likely to have no difficulty with the abbreviation(s) SSATTB. It is unlikely that someone unfamiliar with the abbreviations is going to be any more comfortable with their spelled-out forms.

The abbreviation of foreign words presents a further significant issue – does the Anglophone base to our rules (or bias, even?) mean that extreme caution should be exercised in the use of abbreviations of foreign-language words? Or is it reasonable to assume that a user able to understand the transcribed elements of the description would be equally comfortable with the use of abbreviations commonly encountered in that language? Would even an English speaker find *Ausg.* any more problematic than *Ausgabe*?

AACR2 currently uses abbreviations where there is no information available to populate what is in effect a mandatory data element (e.g. place of publication). This raises a broader question as to why it is mandatory to supply data – roughly equivalent to “not given” or “not known” – for some elements but not for others.

Conclusion

Although the rationale for allowing abbreviations into catalogue entries seems to have changed little over the years – the decline in the use of catalogue cards and the ability to fit more (but, realistically, not unlimited) content into the available screen display seems the only significant difference – the fact that concerns have been raised about the continued use of an extensive list of potential abbreviations and the hidden costs associated with learning, and/or continually checking such lists, suggests that revision is a desirable ambition in the context of a new edition of AACR.

The current method of presenting information about the use of abbreviations, with specific rules for certain parts of the catalogue entry and more general rules for other areas then qualified by a series of footnotes, lacks clarity. In addition, some current rules mix

instructions on the retention of abbreviations found in the item being described or used by a person or body with cataloguer-supplied abbreviations.

The justification that abbreviations are necessary to save keystrokes is becoming increasingly irrelevant, given the widespread use of macro software and other mechanisms whereby standard words and phrases are automatically copied into the catalogue record in one or two keystrokes. Since the size of the copied text is irrelevant, there is no advantage in including abbreviations in the text. Equally, there are other technical solutions that provide for efficiency in the record creation process without, at the same time, requiring that abbreviations be included in the record resulting from this process. Post-processing of the catalogue record which replaces abbreviated input with the full expansion, and real-time processing to replace abbreviated input with that expansion both provide for efficiency of input without requiring that such efficiency is translated into abbreviations in the finished record made available to users or uploaded into union catalogues. If library systems are not all yet able to take advantage of such functionality, that is for the system designers to deal with. It is not the role of the rules to compensate for system shortcomings.

Recommendations

1. JSC should determine the extent to which the application of abbreviations is intended to be intelligible to an international, multi-lingual audience or to a largely Anglophone one.

2. A follow-up paper should be requested to address the implementation of the outline proposals given below, modified as required by any decision reached in response to recommendation 1 above.

3. In the interests of clarity and ease of use by both cataloguers and users of catalogues, abbreviation of words and terms should be minimised.

4. AACR3 should aim to continue to provide lists of permitted abbreviations, as well as instructions on their use.

5. The use of abbreviations should be made generally optional, except where explicitly stated to the contrary, and should be discouraged in the Notes area.

Whilst consistency in the use of abbreviations may be desirable within some parts of a catalogue entry, requiring their use is something that should be kept to a minimum. Since the Notes area is close to “natural language”, the use of abbreviations there should be retained only where the content is constrained within a handful of standardised forms.

6. Instructions on the use of abbreviations and lists of the abbreviations that must or may be used should be organised according to data element.

The objective must be to make it easier for the user of the rules to determine what abbreviations are available for use in any particular part of the catalogue entry.

7. The existing list of Roman alphabet abbreviations (B.9) should be reviewed

- abbreviations of English-language and Latin words should be retained if they are found in a selection of major dictionaries – and reflect, therefore, worldwide acceptance within the English-speaking world – or in reference sources relevant to a specific audience in which such words would be most usually encountered;
- abbreviations of foreign-language words or phrases should be retained only if they are accepted into major dictionaries in their respective languages or in the cataloguing codes developed by the relevant communities.

This recommendation effectively accepts that user understanding of our catalogue entries ought, as a matter of principle, to be given a higher priority than economy of keystrokes.

8. The content of the separate lists of non-Roman alphabet abbreviations (B.10-B.12) should be reviewed with representatives of the relevant specialist communities, applying the broad principles outlined in recommendation 7 above.

Again, if those lists are retained, the objective should be to include only those abbreviations that have gained widespread acceptance within their user communities.

9. The separate list of abbreviations for use when citing bibliographic sources (B.13) should be removed and abbreviations in such cases should be taken from any list applicable to Notes.

This recommendation is designed to aid consistency and to make things easier for the cataloguer. However, it could be argued that any note citing another work should disallow abbreviation entirely so as to make the use of that citation in any search for the work cited as easy for the user to accomplish as possible. It is worth noting, in passing, that the CC:DA Task Force on ISO Harmonization saw no merit in adopting the citation practices documented in ISO 690: Bibliographic references; the Task Force noted, however, that the Chicago Manual of Style “informs much of the citation style prescribed by AACR2”, and one issue for consideration might be the extent to which this informal link is maintained. (Note, too, that the adoption of this recommendation would break a link with Standard Citation Forms for Rare Book Cataloging.)

10. The list of abbreviations for the names of certain countries and of states, provinces, territories, etc., of Australia, Canada, and the United States (B.14) should be extended to include counties and unitary authorities of the United Kingdom and Ireland and, if possible, further internationalised.

The abbreviations listed in this appendix would seem to be in regular usage beyond the library community so it is reasonable to assume user familiarity with them. Use of the abbreviations listed in B.14 is partly controlled by other rules (as stated at the beginning of B.14A) and further action – beyond simply adding abbreviations to this list – would be required in order to achieve consistency and clarity of usage.

11. The list of abbreviations of names of the month (B.15) should be retained and further internationalised.