

To: Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA

From: Kathy Glennan, ALA Representative to the JSC

Subject: Proposals for Subject Relationships

Related document:

6JSC/ALA/Discussion/2, Treatment of Subjects in RDA

ALA thanks the JSC chair for preparing this detailed proposal for subject relationships in RDA. While we believe the proposal is premature, the work contained here will be invaluable as the JSC proceeds to incorporate subjects in RDA.

Background

In May 2011, the Library of Congress Representative submitted a discussion paper (6JSC/LC rep/3, Chapters 12–16, 23, 33–37: Group 2 Entities and “subject”), on what might be done with the placeholder chapters relating to subjects in RDA. The JSC (6JSC/M/284–308, at M.289.1) determined that

The LC rep will draft a follow up document to 6JSC/LC rep/3 which summarizes the consensus reached so far in terms of making basic statements about “subject” in RDA and fleshing out the “concept”, “object” and “place” entities. The entity “event” involves more complex issues and further discussions will be necessary in order to develop it in the RDA context. A general subject relationship will be declared to the effect that a work can have a subject relationship to anything.

At that time, ALA had been generally supportive of an approach to subject entities and relationships in RDA that followed the FRBR model, including the definition of the FRBR Group 3 entities.

During the intervening time since 6JSC/LC rep/3 was considered, the thinking of ALA’s subject experts has evolved. The results of our deliberations were submitted to the Joint Steering Committee as 6JSC/ALA/Discussion/2. It presents a strategy for developing the treatment of subjects in RDA that is different from — indeed, incompatible with — that proposed in 6JSC/Chair/8.

Summary of the strategy proposed in 6JSC/ALA/Discussion 2

ALA’s strategy is based on the conviction that there are certain fundamental decisions about the treatment of subjects in RDA that need to be made before it is possible to draft specific guidelines and instructions to replace the current “placeholder” chapters in RDA. These decisions, and ALA’s recommendations, may be summarized as follows:

1. Given the differences among the FRBR, FRAD, and FRSAD models in their approach to subjects, the JSC needs to decide which model to follow. ALA believes strongly that the FRBR model, in which the subject relationship may exist between the work entity and each of the eleven Group 1, Group 2, and Group 3 entities, imposes undue constraints on the structure and content of authoritative subject systems. We believe that the FRSAD

approach, in which the subject relationship exists between the work entity and a single *Thema* entity offers the greatest flexibility in matching existing subject systems to the model, and allows authoritative subject systems to define their own structure and content without reference to the more detailed FRBR entities.

ALA is aware that the FRBR Review Group is working on reconciling the FR models. We eagerly await the results of that effort, so that the JSC's decision making can be informed by that process.

2. The JSC needs to decide whether the *has as subject / is subject of* relationship exists only between the work entity and the subject entity or entities. ALA raised some concerns about accepting this specification of the FR model, but did not recommend rejecting it.
3. The JSC needs to decide what entities may be the object of the subject relationship: a single *Thema* entity or each of the eleven FRBR entities. ALA strongly recommends the former approach.
4. If the FRBR Group 3 entities are retained in RDA, the JSC needs to decide whether the Event and Place entities should be extended beyond the subject relationship. ALA strongly recommended that Event and Place *not* be extended beyond the subject relationship, and that Events as corporate bodies and Places as jurisdictions be covered in RDA Chapter 11.
5. If the JSC decides to define a single *Thema* entity (which ALA suggests we rename as *Subject*), a decision will need to be made about what attributes of this entity should be defined in RDA. ALA outlined the attributes defined in FRSAD and commented on whether they seemed appropriate for RDA.

ALA believes strongly that these issues need to be decided before instructions and guidelines can be drafted.

ALA also continues to prefer the approach to the treatment of subjects recommended in 6JSC/ALA/Discussion/2. Because of this, we disagree with most of the specific proposals contained in 6JSC/Chair/8. We have, however, commented on each of these recommendations in the event that the JSC chooses to proceed on the basis of those proposals.

General recommendations and concerns with 6JSC/Chair/8

Choice of model. The basic premise of the proposals in 6JSC/Chair/8 is that RDA should use “a generic approach to subject relationships and the Group 3 entities, following the standards for subject access points and classification numbers used by the agency creating the data”, i.e., an authoritative subject system. The major problem with this approach is that there is a fundamental incompatibility between the FRBR Group 3 entities and most of the authoritative subject systems (e.g., LCSH, AAT, MeSH, etc.) used by librarians and other metadata creators. Most subject systems do not accommodate the FRBR Group 3 entities explicitly. Furthermore, the FRBR Group 3 entities do not encompass all of the possible entities that could be subjects of a work, such as time, processes, activities, or situations. Basing the treatment of subjects in RDA on the FRBR Group 3 entities is too restrictive, and artificially imposes an extra level of hierarchy and complexity that catalogers and other metadata creators, using RDA, would have to deal with.

RDA should not determine the basic structure of subject entities and relationships; the authoritative subject systems should do this.

A simpler and better approach to treating subjects in RDA would be to use a single subject entity, as specified in the FRSAD model. Following this approach, RDA would include instructions to follow the standards for subject access points and classification numbers used by authoritative subject systems. RDA would only need to define one subject entity, and a few key attributes and relationships, thereby reducing the potential for conflict and confusion between RDA and subject systems that would be used by catalogers and other metadata creators.

The main rationale for the approach recommended by ALA is that we believed that the single-entity approach was the only available option that did not place inappropriate constraints on *the ability of subject systems to define their own structure and content*. The ALA discussion paper uses that language constantly to argue against putting detail into RDA that more properly belongs in the subject system.

This approach acknowledges that the subject relationship is not confined to the FRBR Group 3 entities, but must encompass the Group 1 and Group 2 entities as well; any of these may be the subject of a work. We believe that the FRSAD *Thema* entity, which is defined as “any entity used as the subject of a work” [FRSAD, p. 15], subsumes all the FRBR entities — but only when they stand in a subject relationship to a work.

Implications of the choice of model. 6JSC/Chair/8 proposes to define a single subject relationship between a work and any entity that is the subject of the work. Specifically, it proposes to define all eleven FRBR entities, including the Group 3 entities; this implies that any subject relationship must be defined between a work and one of the eleven FRBR entities. Whatever categories are defined in the authoritative subject system must therefore be recorded in one of these eleven entities. The “native” categories may be more general, more specific, or just very different from the FRBR entities. This is why ALA feels that the single subject entity provides more flexibility in mapping the structure and content of the authoritative subject systems to RDA.

Furthermore, the proposal to define a single subject relationship between the work entity and the eleven possible subject entities is not the way RDA works. All relationship elements in RDA are defined in terms of a “Related [entity]” (or a sub-property of such an element). There cannot be a singular relationship to multiple entities; if the FRBR approach is retained; Chapter 23 must define a minimum of eleven relationship elements.

In conclusion. The JSC should not adopt the proposals in 6JSC/Chair/8 to use the FRBR entities as the basis for treating subjects in RDA. The JSC should consider basing the treatment of subjects in RDA on the concept of a single subject entity as advocated in 6JSC/ALA/Discussion/2.

Recommendations and comments on each specific proposal

ALA has prepared 12 pages of detailed comments on this proposal. However, in light of the emerging consensus that specific revision proposals are premature, we have decided that it would not be useful to submit these comments as part of our response. However, we will be happy to do so if the JSC would find it useful.