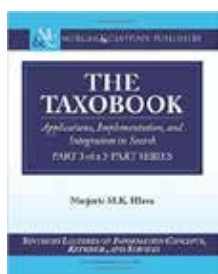# Marjorie M.K. Hlava. *The Taxobook.* Morgan & Claypool Publishers, 2015.

Despite the growing importance of the field of taxonomy and the wide range of scope of coverage of the field, the number of books on the subject is still limited. I have reviewed for *Key Words* four other books about taxonomy creation over the past nine years. One was focused on enterprise taxonomies, one on controlled vocabularies for cultural/museum works, and one took a much broader approach to knowledge organization.

Thus, I was pleased to see this new publication by Marjorie Hlava. The coverage of the full scope of different kinds taxonomies, including thesauri, and their different kinds of implementations, is a strength of *The Taxobook*, in contrast to books on taxonomies such as those by Darin Stewart and Patrick Lambe which focus on enterprise taxonomies.

Hlava is well-qualified to write on this subject. She and her company, Access Innovations, have been creating thesauri and other controlled vocabularies for a diversity of clients and uses since the late 1970s. She was a member of the committee that wrote the ANSI/NISO Z39.19 standard for controlled vocabularies. She was the founding chair of the Taxonomy Division of SLA (Special Libraries Association), and she has given numerous workshops and conference presentations on taxonomies.

The Taxobook is a three-volume series. You can purchase one or more books separately. The focus of each is sufficiently different that it is possible to read one without the others. Content of one does not require knowledge of the content of the other volumes. Nevertheless, the reader might not be satisfied with the more limited scope of coverage of just one volume. Furthermore, the volumes are not that large (54, 117, and 128 pages in length, respectively). Combined they are the length of a typical book. The concept of separate volumes makes sense, though, for those who already know quite a bit about taxonomies and just want to read more in some areas of the field but don't need a thorough coverage of everything or for those who know nothing about the field and only have the time and inclination to read a little bit. Breaking the book into three volumes also has the benefit of PDF versions being not too large.

The Taxobook is available in paperback print volumes and also as PDF files. The PDF versions are intended to be the primary format. The book includes hyperlinked URLs and citation numbers linking to endnotes, and its graphics are in full color. A drawback to the print version is that the citations are listed only as endnotes at the back of each volume, which makes them less conveniently located. Also, some citations are URLs only, rather than full citations. The URLs also lack access dates.

Part 1: *History, Theories and Concepts of Knowledge Organization* traces the history of knowledge organization from ancient Greece to the early 20th century, including the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, Cesalpino, Ray, Linnaeus, Descartes, Locke, Kant, Ferrier, Cutter, Dewey, Ranganathan, and Roget. The level of detail in this short volume is appropriate: enough to present some interesting ideas, but not too much detail to lose the interest of non-scholars.

Part 2: *Principles and Practices of Taxonomy Construction* is the core volume of the series. It starts out covering all the

necessary basics: the relationship of taxonomies and metadata and to information architecture, how taxonomies and thesauri are used, where they are used, why they are used, issues of vocabulary control, types of controlled vocabularies, metadata standards, and indexing/tagging. Lengthy explanations of markup languages and SGML in particular and of the Dublin Core metadata standard are probably not needed. Other chapters are about selecting and formatting terms, building taxonomy structure and relationships, and reviewing and maintaining the taxonomy. The final chapter is about standards.

Part 3: *Applications, Implementations, and Integration in Search* covers the following important topics: what taxonomy management software does, how a taxonomy can be displayed in a web user interface, how taxonomy is connected to search, how a taxonomy is implemented in a database or on a website, and general search engine technologies. Some of the information in this volume, including systems architecture schematic diagrams, may seem too technical to the typical taxonomist with a library science or indexing background. This volume may be directed to a slightly different audience than the audience of volume 2. Those who create taxonomies are often not the same people who implement them. The availability of separate volumes, however, offers the flexibility to address potentially different audiences.

I don't have any issue with the accuracy of the information presented. Hlava knows her stuff when it comes to taxonomies. I might differ in what is presented and how, especially for complex topics that have more than one aspect to them, especially as in volume 2. For example, there are different aspects to the notion of pre-coordination and post-coordination. I have presented this concept as the choice of creating a single complex pre-coordinated term that could just as well be split into two terms that could be used in combination. Hlava discusses a different aspect of precoordination, involving the combination of index terms in an indexing system, traditionally with a dash between them.

There are good tidbits of information, especially in volume 2, such as explaining that a taxonomy is subjective (volume 2, pp. 44-45). Another good point: "People who are experts in a field are going to want to build a thesaurus that matches their perception of that field. Clients need thesauri that match their collections. The challenge is combining those two goals into one goal." (p. 47) I also agree with the general rule of thumb that a thesaurus have a ratio of 1.5 nonpreferred terms (synonyms) to each preferred term (volume 2, p. 17). A section on taxonomy review guidelines for subject matter experts is also very practical.

The first volume is more academic and has some interesting insights, but does not provide information that is needed for practical purposes. The second volume has information necessary for creating taxonomies. The third volume contains some new information for me, but I question whether it is all necessary for the taxonomist. Also, in contrast to the lengthy discussion of search engines, other aspects of taxonomy implementation, such as content management systems or digital asset management systems, are not discussed sufficiently.

The style of the writing is informal, somewhat conversational, such as the frequent use of the first person, and at times it is even chatty, such as "But I digress..." I imagine the author uses exactly the same sentences in conference presentations. The style is interesting and engaging to read on what could be a dry subject.

> In the present day-to-day environment, floods of information wash over us without respite. We cannot afford the time to take a leisurely or overly philosophic attitude toward compiling and organizing a body of knowledge for ivory tower approaches and lengthy periods of contemplation. (vol. 2, p. 51)

Whether this is effective in presenting a somewhat complex subject in writing is less certain. If the informal style does not always present the material in the clearest manner, at least the use of short chapters and numbered sections within chapters organizes the material clearly.

The first volume, and to a lesser extent the second volume, contains a number of lengthy multiple-paragraph quotations, several of which are from Wikipedia. These appear to substitute for the author's own ideas in some places. Some quotations also do not have sufficient introductions, especially when the source citation is listed at the end of the book.

The Taxobook has an extensive glossary. The same glossary repeated in all three volumes. Perhaps a bit unconventional, though, the glossary has double posts, whereby the same definitions are repeated under entries for both synonyms of an entry. Also, many definitions are quoted from other sources, especially from ANSI/NISO Z39.19-2010R.

None of the volumes have an index! *The Taxobook* does, however, have a very detailed, decimal-enumerated table of contents within each volume, which is helpful for locating main topics. What is especially of interest to us indexers, though, is that the book lists the ASI website, and specifically its webpage page on thesauri, as a source for locating taxonomies for adaptation.

Price may be an issue, especially for the independent contractor or freelancer. Each volume is $50, which comes to $150 for the entire book. If we compare this with that of other textbooks, workshops, or webinars, this price may seem in reason.

Taxonomy creation, like indexing, is more an art than a science. There are general standards and guidelines, but also tips and tricks, different approaches, and various special circumstances. One course or one book alone is not sufficient to learn the craft well, and different experts take different approaches. As a practicing indexer may have purchased more than one book on indexing, the professional taxonomist should also turn to more than one book on taxonomies. *The Taxobook* is definitely one of those books. ∎

— Heather Hedden

Heather Hedden, past manager of the Taxonomies & Controlled Vocabularies SIG and a current member of the ASI Board of Directors, is the author of The Accidental Taxonomist *and a Senior Vocabulary Editor at Cengage Learning.*