THE BOOK INDEX – AN EXPERIMENTAL INDEXICAL CONFERENCE REPORT

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Introduction

Indexes were at the center of attention on the 22nd and 23rd of June 2017 in the Lecture Hall of the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Dennis Duncan (University of Oxford) organized the conference “The Book Index”, which looked at indexes from the classics to today, from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives.

In reference to and playing with the topic of the conference, this report is experimental and indexical. It is divided into three parts: The “Table of Contents” – or might it be an “index”? – gives a first impression of the topic. A brief, very eclectic summary of the conference follows. The main part of this conference report, however, is an index. It is neither complete nor could it be done otherwise. Thus, it might be a “bad index”. Nevertheless, it aims to give an insight into the main topics, the interconnections of the presentations, and the many different characteristics and functions of indexes.
Table of Contents

Indexes can relate to the “main text” – or not.

Indexes can be functional – or not.

Indexes can be guiding aids – or not.

Indexes can be in alphabetical order – or not.

Indexes can be produced and bound together with the “main text” – or not.

Indexes can be adapted to each edition of a book – or not.

Indexes can be translatable – or not.

Indexes can be useful – or not.

Indexes can be poetical, philosophical – or neither.

Brief Summary

The “table of contents” shows the broad variety of functions indexes can have. Indexing is not only mechanical, but also liberal, as Ann Blair (Harvard) and especially the representatives of the “Society of Indexers” pointed out (Ann Kingdom, Ann Hudson, Paula Clarke Bain, Pilar Wyman (ASI), Janice Rayment). These representatives gave a vivid insight into their daily work and added their professional perspective to the academic discussion. They emphasized that indexing – besides its mechanical aspects, which are nowadays often taken over by software – is a highly cognitive and creative task.

The idea of the index as a fixed part of a book, which is bound together with the “main text” and refers to the latter, was challenged by many papers. The type of index and its availability not only depends on the genre of writing, but also on the cultural context of publication. Translating a book with an index can lead to many difficulties, especially, when the foreign context – in this case the Chinese one – did not intend any index (Liangyu Fu (Michigan); see also Florence Hsia). It appears that “back of the book” indexes only came into Chinese natural science books through translation from English (Liangyu Fu). Liangyu Fu dates this introduction back to at least the early 1870s.

Indexes and the question of how to order names, places or whatever is indexed, are closely connected. As the conference made clear,
alphabetical order was and is very popular (see index). However, it is not always the “most practical form of an index”, as Emily Steiner explained (University of Pennsylvania). Especially in the medieval period, where language was not standardized and where one could use a “v” instead of a “u” or a “w” (in the case of early modern English), the alphabetical order did not necessarily help to find the searched topic (Emily Steiner; see also James Freeman (University of Cambridge)). Despite being “dysfunctional”, such indexes could and can have a function by affecting reading practices (Emily Steiner). Thus, an index can influence the reading of a text, whether it is directly interlinked with it or not.

Index of the Conference

The following index lists the titles of the papers, keywords as well as key sentences. It refers to the oral “text” of the conference, is therefore not a “guiding aid” to understand a text, as no one can grasp the latter in all the details anymore. It is structured alphabetically (mostly) and links different papers. However, not all possible connections are made. Thus, it is a “dysfunctional” index, which has no clear order and which is not comprehensive at all. Its messiness aims to illustrate the challenges of indexing.

**Papers**

Ann Blair (Harvard): “Indexing, Libera; Indexing, mechanical”
Ann Komorn, Ann Hudson, Paula Clarke Bank, Bill Wyman, Janice Raymond (Society of Indexers): “Indexing Now”
Emily Steiner (University of Pennsylvania): “Alphabetical Logic: John Trevisa’s Index to the Polychronicon”
Eve Houghton (Yale): “Overzealous: The Indexes of Francis Daniel Pastorius”
Tom Clayton (Princeton): “The Tenser at the Gilded Lid: Revealing George Herbert’s Index”
Frits Ahrensperger (IRC): “Backstairs to Philosophy: Heidegger and Cassirer on Indexing”
Angela Carr (New School): “The Index as Genre and the Curriculum Swerve”
James Mussell (Leeds): “The indexes of some periodicals are good, but those of the many are bad”: Indexing Periodicals in the Nineteenth Century
Liangyu Fu (Michigan): “Indexing Science: Translations in Nineteenth-Century China”
Kyle Cowen-Lewis (Yale): “Indexing and Appropriation: Valeria Maximus as Sermo-Teacher”
James Freeman (Cambridge): “Towards acquaintance with following tables: The Earliest Indexes to Ralph Higonio’s Polychronicon”
Shel Rogers (Oklahoma): “The Eighteenth-Century Satric Literary Index as a Measure of Cultural Authority”
Sean Silver (Michigan): “John Locke and the Cognitive Index”

**Headwords, keywords, sentences**

“Reads the same over & over, & over, but not overly” [Ms Codex, 72G vol. 1, fol. 50H] {Eve Houghton}
(possible) Collaboration [Frits Ahrensperger, Chair, Audience; Kyle Cowen-Lewis]
19th century: “Worry that modern read nothing in common or the wrong publications or the right publications the wrong way [James Mussell]
Abstinence / abstinance (Tom Clayton; Nikolaus Wechsbeamer)
Adding (James Freeman; Kyle Cowen-Lewis; Eve Houghton)
Adolphina (Tom Clayton)
Alphabetical (Ann Blair; Nikolaus Wechsbeamer; James Freeman; Emily Steiner; Eve Houghton)
Anniversaries (Ann Blair)
An index of an index (a.o. Ann Blair; Shel Rogers)
Anti index (Angela Carr)
Back-of-the-book index (Liangyu Fu; Shel Rogers)
Beet (Eve Houghton)
Chinese language never had an index system (Florence Hola)
Classics (James Freeman)
Commonplace (a.o. Eve Houghton; Ann Blair)
Compendious genre (Emily Steiner; Ann Blair)
Compilation, compiling (Frits Ahrensperger; James Freeman; Emily Steiner; Eve Houghton)

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P.S.: Originally, it was planned to include all the “indexes” that participants made during the conference in this post. Due to fact, that the latter is already long enough for the genre of the blogpost, I decided to do without this addition. However, you are kindly invited to complete the “index” by commenting the post. This way, we can even work on a new, collaborative, open and evolving way of indexing.

P.S. II: See also the blogposts by the indexers Paula Clarke Bain and Nicola King, and the tweets on #bookindex17.