

The Monolingual Cataloging Monolith: A Barrier to Library Access for Readers of Spanish

by Bruce Jensen

Has the Collection Outpaced Access?

Spanish-language materials have received steadily increasing attention in the collection development and acquisitions policies of U.S. and Canadian public libraries. Yet despite a slowly growing consciousness of frontline public-service concerns in accommodating speakers of Spanish, precious little care is invested in the technical processing side of the library's responsibility to these users.

One timeworn excuse is the size of Spanish-language collections. In many public libraries, these have long been easily browsable, occupying no more than a few feet of shelf space. This, however, is changing, and it is emphatically not true of major systems—certainly not in an era of multi-branch consortia with vast online public access catalogs (OPACs).

Differential quality of service and access for Spanish speakers is of genuine concern to the profession, but our consideration of the problem focuses almost exclusively on affective factors. Many U.S. and Canadian libraries are creating spaces, policies, collections, and programming designed to attract and satisfy Spanish-speaking patrons, and this is a salutary trend. But absent from consideration, more often than not, is cataloging.

Vivian Pisano has long been an important, if lonely, voice in this discussion. For nearly 20 years she has worked for "bibliographic access that is intelligible" to readers of Spanish (Pisano and Lavery, 1986, p. 36), recognizing that one major obstacle is a perennial shortage of multilingual, pluricultural technical service personnel in libraries. Regardless, cooperative work toward "intelligible access" is now more viable than ever.

Libraries for All, Catalogs for Some

Mastery of the OPAC is essential to full enjoyment of the modern library. Shelf browsing, clearly, is no longer adequate for a highly actualized library patron, particularly in multi-branch and cooperative systems where foreign-language holdings are likely to be scattered thinly among member libraries or else concentrated at a focus branch distant from the user's site. Effective independent use of the OPAC is particularly crucial for those whose mother tongue is spoken by so few librarians.

In most U.S. and Canadian catalogs, sought records are much more readily located using English than Spanish; this

follows from the far greater number of access points available to Anglophone users. Once found, the record is likely to be of less value to non-readers of English: youngsters looking at summaries of Spanish-language juvenile books will find these notes written in a language different from that of the very book that interests them. Paradoxically, while the library's collection acknowledges that not all readers use the same language, the structure of its catalog assumes, indeed demands, knowledge of English.

This study concerns the accessibility and usefulness of the OPAC for the monolingual Spanish-reading user, without regard to its interface. Walter Minkel's recent assessment of the Spanish-language content of library web sites (2001), and Hal Bright's list of Spanish-language library home pages (www.nhfpl.lib.ct.us/spanish/bibredep.htm), both raise interesting concerns, but under examination here are the "guts" of the catalog: the transparency and usability of the contents of MARC 245, 500, 505, 520, 600, and 650 fields irrespective of the interface's user-friendliness. This is not to diminish the importance of a good Spanish-language interface, but it is of dubious benefit to overlay a brilliant mask atop a catalog in which the lack of familiar access points or comprehensible item descriptions fundamentally presents obstacles to its use by readers of Spanish.

Methods and Findings; or, Seven Would Be Too Many

The beauty of the electronic age is the field study opportunities it affords those of us without budgets for travel or research. I visited—virtually—and thumbed through some 100 public library and school library catalogs throughout the United States and Canada, including those of the biggest cities and several regions with large Spanish-speaking populations. I also addressed appeals to the listserv of REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking, and to the Spanish in Our Libraries discussion list, thereby learning of a few exemplary catalogs overlooked in my survey. One hundred catalogs is but a small fraction of all the OPACs north of the Río Bravo (see: Río Grande) yet my barnstorming tour left no doubt that only a handful of libraries are using Spanish in their catalogs in any meaningful way.

I looked primarily at records for juvenile literature, as

these are the most likely to contain summary notes in the MARC 500 or 520 fields. I surveyed three types of books: bilingual Spanish-English titles; titles published in Spanish but not available in English; and works published in both languages, in separate editions, and held by the library in both languages. Additionally, in the case of some libraries, I took note of the cataloging of items such as videos that emerged in keyword searches using Spanish words. For all items, I compared the library's handling of the fields typically presented to the user as "Notes," "Summary," or "Abstract," paying attention also to subject headings and other viewable fields if they were applicable.

The bad news is that the vast majority of libraries have catalogs that are largely opaque to people who read only Spanish. When the Notes field of a Spanish-language title contains any text, it is almost certainly in English. Books available in both languages are apt to have less useful information in the record of the Spanish language version: commonly the English book's record will mention that the volume contains an index or a bibliography, while that of the Spanish version will say only, "Translation of _____."

In a few cases—unusual, but they exist—the catalog garbles the title or even adds some inadvertent obscenity. Pat Mora's Spanish version of her classic tale about Tomás Rivera, *Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca*, is rendered in some catalogs as *Tomâas y la seänora de la biblioteca*. In one large library system, a book called *Vamos a la escuela* has as its only descriptive note a phrase that translates literally as "Three to six anuses." The omission or misuse of diacritics—in this case the tilde over the ñ in the word *años*, meaning "years"—can significantly affect meaning and intelligibility in Spanish and other languages.

Exemplary Exceptions

Does any of this really matter, now that all-powerful online catalogs perform rapid and comprehensive searches? Does technology ameliorate the fact that Spanish-language books have notes and title fields that are either empty, filled with English, or else contain nonsense?

Sanford Berman (1992) wrote a decade ago, in analyzing the "dismal cataloging scene" involving multicultural materials,

The overriding omission in descriptive cataloging is notes. The alue of "full" or "partial contents" notes is twofold: they clarify for catalog users what's really in a work, and perhaps convey something of its tone, making it easier to decide whether to examine the item or not; and they facilitate online keyword searching. (p. 135)

A small number of libraries indeed exploit notes fields in various ways, doing much better than their peers to enhance multilingual access. One simple technique

that requires no translation ability has catalogers including transcriptions of flyleaf or title page phrases in some of their records, or filling the 505 field of anthologies and story collections with the table of contents and making this available for OPAC keyword searching and display. This, at least, gives a clue to the nature of an item even in the absence of genuine descriptive notes and multiplies the access points available to users whose key to the catalog and the collection is the Spanish language.

Then there are libraries that weave Spanish into the formal syndetic structure of the catalog by assigning subject headings in that language. This laudable measure, too, can be accomplished by catalogers without knowledge of Spanish, thanks to the extensive Bilindex thesaurus first published in 1984 with some 15,000 LCSH equivalents (Aveney and Pisano, 1985) and recently issued in a new 2001/2002 edition, as well as the Oakland and San Francisco Public Libraries' online supplement at www.clnet.ucr.edu/library/bplg/sujetos.htm (Pisano, 2001). Public libraries can make good use of Spanish-language Dewey headings, particularly when cataloging juvenile materials; a Spanish version of DDC 20 is available from Forest Press (www.oclc.org/oclc/press/950825a.htm). Again, though such headings are of indisputable assistance to readers of Spanish (Fina, 1993), few systems make use of them. Chicago Public Library (www.chipublib.org), Inglewood (CA) Public Library (www.cityof-inglewood.org/depts/library/Index.htm), and the County of Los Angeles Public Library are among those that do, and all three enhance the headings with hyperlinks.

One could imagine that a clever computer programmer might be able to devise a utility capable of wholesale retrospective addition of Spanish-language headings to records using a simple algorithm for matching these to their English-language equivalents. One could further imagine that any enterprise able to offer such a tool might well realize a tidy profit.

A few catalogs demonstrate the utopian ideal of records that match the language(s) of the item. Marie Kaneko of the City of Commerce (CA) Public Library is among those who regard this kind of vernacular cataloging as worthwhile (Kaneko, 2001). Commerce's choice of Dynix for its circulation system, she says, allows properly accented text and presentation of a Spanish-language user interface. Help screens and signage in Spanish further facilitate use.

But the Commerce library does not stop there. Kaneko reports that "Our cataloging for Spanish language and dual text items is completely bilingual" (Kaneko, 2001). She uses subject headings from the sources noted above, and occasionally devises her own. Kaneko does original cataloging, as well as "upgrades" of OCLC records. "If the item is a translation, I will add a 130 or 240 field so that the item will pop up on a title search," she explains. "I also translate the 505 or summary field. I will add local subject headings (650 & 651). Spanish-language videos, whether subtitled, dubbed or original language get the headings 'Películas cinematográficas' and 'Feature films--Spanish language'" (Kaneko, 2001).

Kaneko feels the effort is important. "I try to have as many access points on a record as possible. This makes things

handy when trying to plan bilingual storytimes, as well as making it easy on the patrons. We find this helps both patrons and non-Spanish-speaking librarians who are trying to assist them . . . what we do is a bit time-consuming, but pays off during interactions with patrons” (Kaneko, 2001).

El Paso, Texas, is the largest U.S. city on the Mexican border, and the head cataloger of its public library system, Glenda Roberts, similarly takes pains to accommodate monolingual Spanish-speaking users. Her staff assigns headings derived from Bilindex to items in Spanish, with the further addition of “—Spanish language” as a free-floating subdivision in the English portion of the headings. Translated and bilingual items are accessible under both versions of their titles. Additionally, Roberts’s staff sees to it that most of the notes are in Spanish on the bibliographic records of items that are entirely or partially in that language (Roberts, 2001).

Another outstanding catalog for its inclusion of extensive Spanish-language notes and subject headings is that of the San Antonio (TX) Public Library (www.sat.lib.tgx.us). Bibliographic Services Manager Margret Baca credits her Spanish-language cataloger, Danelle Crowley, who, she notes, “works very hard to make these records accessible to Spanish speakers” through original cataloging, editing of OCLC records, and assignation of Bilindex subject headings (Baca, 2001). Crowley’s original records are available to other member libraries, and if the San Antonio Public Library succeeds in obtaining for her an “enhance” authorization from OCLC, her edited records will be shared as well. Crowley herself has pointed out that properly bilingual uploaded records can prevent “untold duplication of effort” (Crowley, 2000, p. 66). Baca (2001) regards the construction of a language-conscious catalog as part of the library’s responsibility to its patrons: “The extensive editing and creation of Spanish-language records is indeed costly and time-consuming,” she observes, “but necessary to meet the needs of our users.”

School districts, too, can offer enlightened bibliographic access when not constrained by statutory or sentimental restrictions against languages other than English. The catalog of the Denver (CO) Public Schools (ersdec.denver.k-12.co.us) respects the knowledge and preferences of young readers with summaries written in the language of the item being summarized, as well as with bilingual subject headings.

Another Kind of Robbery

The arguments against such cataloging might be readily imagined. Some are easily dismissed. At one extreme, nativist resistance to the provision of public services in foreign languages has already been preempted by the availability of multilingual OPACs. Many school districts would likely need to overcome such sentiment; this challenge would be mitigated, though, by the relatively tiny space that library cataloging occupies in the popular consciousness.

The more compelling argument has to do with the expense of building a better catalog. The kind of cataloging practiced in Commerce, El Paso, and San Antonio is undeniably time-consuming and costly. Although Erbolato-Ramsey

and Grover (1994) illustrate how intelligent use of union catalogs such as OCLC and RLIN can, in the academic library setting, ease backlogs of Spanish-language items, the tendency to fill a public library catalog with inadequate records can always be justified by pointing to the budget. Because funds for such materials are limited, the argument goes, the money spent on enhanced cataloging would only rob Spanish-reading users of materials.

Seen another way, of course, minimalist cataloging is another kind of robbery. It arguably deprives users of the books they want, need, and in fact have by concealing those books in the stacks. But in the absence of widespread concern for this principle, advocates of better cataloging will need to find convincing practical arguments and inexpensive incentives for the use of Spanish in item records.

A fairly simple empirical study could track the circulation of a group of conventionally cataloged items versus a set of items cataloged using Spanish, though it would be necessary to control for the possibility of browsers discovering the former after being drawn to the shelves by the latter. A sensible design might restrict such a study to materials requested from other branches or from remote storage.

One fiscally promising measure was tried in 1997 when WLN joined with Spanish-language book supplier Libros Sin Fronteras to offer libraries bilingual records in USMARC format for items carried by the company (“WLN to Provide...”, 1997). Libros Sin Fronteras owner Michael Shapiro (2001) laments that the project was “unsustainable” due to its cost, but notes that the bookseller is currently looking into ways to reintroduce such a service.


Kaneko offers a tantalizing suggestion: Publishers and distributors might find it beneficial to provide a library with books gratis, in exchange for the creation of rich bilingual MARC records uploaded to OCLC. She notes that for other libraries, the ease of downloading such a record would help pave the way for acquisition of the item. “Some of the materials I buy languish in technical processing because of the time it takes to create a totally new record from scratch,” she notes. “Even if the item was originally in French or German and there’s an OCLC record for that, my job cobbling up a new Spanish record goes much faster” (Kaneko, 2001).

A Modest Proposal

The expansion of Spanish-language collections calls for increasingly sophisticated bibliographic control. Libraries that focus on the number of such volumes they own might do well to examine just how accessible these are and make an honest assessment of the best ways to distribute the portion of the budget devoted to Spanish-language materials.

If money can be found for hotel rooms at the Guadalajara Book Fair, it might also be found for enhanced cataloging of new volumes—even if that means a smaller number of new volumes, for it has never been true that having a huge collection makes up for poor organization. Grantors of funds for Spanish-language collection building could reasonably stipulate that a certain percentage of the budget be invested

in proper cataloging. If more members of cooperative cataloging databases follow the lead of libraries like San Antonio, El Paso, and City of Commerce, the scarcity of adequate records could become a problem of the past.

Alternatively, the problem could continue indefinitely. "All the pieces are in place," wrote Patricia Tarin (1987) 15 years ago, "to provide full-access Spanish or bilingual catalogs, even in libraries with little or no Spanish speaking staff." (p. 26). Those pieces are still in place. What has prevented their wider use is open to discussion. 

REFERENCES

- Aveney, B. and Pisano, V. (1985). Hispanex: Serving libraries serving Hispanics. *Wilson Library Bulletin* 59(7), March: 453-455.
- Baca, M. (2001). Personal interview, May 22; and "Re: Spanish-language records," e-mail to the author, May 23.
- Berman, S. (1992). Things are seldom what they seem: Finding multicultural materials in library catalogs. In James Danky and Sanford Berman (eds.), *Alternative Library Literature 1990-91* (132-136). Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company.
- Bright, H. (2000, April 26). Sitios hispanohablantes escogidos por bibliotecarios. New Haven Free Public Library, www.nhfpl.lib.ct.us/spanish/bibredesp.htm.
- Crowley, D. (2000). Use of the Spanish language in organizing library materials for Latinos. In Salvador Güereña (ed.), *Library Services to Latinos* (61-72). Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company.
- Denver Public Schools. Library Information on the Net (LION) (Holdings catalog). <http://ersdec.denver.k12.co.us/>.
- Erbolato-Ramsey, C. and Grover, M. L. (1994). Spanish and Portuguese online cataloging: Where do you start from scratch? *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 19(1): 75-87.
- Fina, M. (1993). The role of subject headings in access to information: The experience of one Spanish-speaking patron. *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 17(1/2): 267-274.
- Jensen, B. (2001, May 14). "Cataloging: Maximizing access for Spanish speakers." Online posting, REFORMANet (lmri.ucsb.edu/pipermail/reformanet/2001-May/007125.html).
- Kaneko, M. (2001). "Cataloging records." E-mail to the author, May 15, and personal communication, June 13.
- Minkel, W. (2001). The Web en español. *Library Journal Netconnect* (Spring): 36-37.
- Oakland Public Library & San Francisco Public Library. (1995). Spanish subject headings. cnet.ucr.edu/library/bplg/sujetos.htm.
- Pisano, V. (2001, May 14). "Re: Cataloging: Maximizing access for Spanish speakers." Online posting, REFORMANet.
- Pisano, V. and Lavery, C. (1986). Spanish-language materials: Help for the cataloger. In Sanford Berman (ed.) *Cataloging special materials: Critiques and innovations* (pp. 35-49). Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx.
- Roberts, G. (2001, May 14). "Re: Cataloging: Maximizing access for Spanish speakers." Online posting, REFORMANet.
- Shapiro, M. (2001). "From Michael Shapiro/Libros Sin Fronteras." E-mail to the author, May 22.
- Tarin, P. A. (1987). Books for the Spanish-speaking sí se puede. *Library Journal* 112(12), July: 25-27.
- WLN to provide Spanish-language cataloging to Libros Sin Fronteras. (1997). *Advanced Technology Libraries* 26(1), January: 7-8.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Jensen is the webmaster for Public Libraries Using Spanish and a reference librarian for the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System in Los Angeles, California. He may be contacted at flaco@ucla.edu.