Introduction to Thema

Thema is the new global subject classification for books and e-books, which has already gathered wide international support. Forward-looking publishers, booksellers, intermediaries and systems and service providers are adopting the new Thema subject category scheme as a part of their business process. This BIC Bite explains what Thema is, and why it is the ideal standard for communicating book subject information with your trading partners.

Background

Subject classification is at the heart of merchandising, discovery, sales and market intelligence. Products in physical and online book stores are searched by subject, and subject-based statistical information is vital to understand the dynamics of the book market. And yet, while the book market itself is ever-more global, subject classifications are mostly national – there are hundreds of different schemes around the world, and even in the English-language market, the schism between the BIC subject scheme and the BISAC scheme developed by the Book Industry Study Group means that many publishers double-up on work and cost, and retailers are forced to map (often very approximately) from one scheme to another. The need for a single scheme usable by the trade in all countries is obvious.

The origin, aims and development of Thema

Thema began with a BIC project that aimed to ‘internationalise’ the BIC subject scheme. While this attracted limited support, it opened the way for Thema, a more ambitious project that was launched in October 2012. Thema took an internationalised BIC as a starting point, and added ideas from classifications used in many other countries. Version 1.0 of the Thema subject classification scheme was published in November 2013.

Thema aims to be global in scope, cross-cultural and multi-lingual, applicable to all parts of the book supply chain, and flexible enough to allow each market to retain its unique cultural voice, while remaining a unified and simple-to-adopt standard. It can be used alongside existing national schemes like BIC, BISAC (USA), WGS (Germany) or CLIL (France), and may eventually replace them – though this is not an immediate goal.

Thema is managed and developed by EDItEUR (the organisation that also develops ONIX), with guidance from an international committee of representatives from more than 15 countries including the USA, UK, Canada and many European countries. Groups in Japan and China are also involved.

Structure of the Thema subject classification scheme

The Thema scheme is a set of around 2500 subject categories, used to describe what a book is about – whether it is a children’s book, a novel, or about the history of art, dentistry, cooking or whatever. The classifications are arranged in a hierarchy, with 20 top-level broad classifications, each subdivided into many sub-categories. Each category has an alphanumeric code and a descriptive heading (e.g. ‘AGA’ and ‘History of art’) and some categories have associated usage notes. Each book can be assigned one or more codes as required.

Thema classifications can be enriched by adding qualifiers, to refine the meaning of the main subject headings. Qualifiers cover geographical areas, historical periods, languages (that is, the language that a book is about, not written in), educational purpose, artistic styles, and special interests (e.g. seasonal interest, or suitable ages for children’s books). A note with AGA, History of Art, suggests the addition of style, geographical and historical period qualifiers, so the subject of a particular book about the history of art might be narrowed to a history of the arts and crafts movement in late 19th Century England (AGA plus 6AF, 1DDU-GB-E, 3MNQ.).
If you already use the BIC subject scheme, the subjects and qualifiers of Thema will be very familiar. But as well as a detailed set of subjects and qualifiers, Thema has ‘national extensions’ – extra qualifiers where there’s a need to add an extra level of detail for specific countries or markets. These are arranged so that if the country-specific extension is stripped off the code, the resulting qualifier still makes sense. 1DDU-GB-E (England) can be stripped to give just 1DDU (United Kingdom) for users who do not require the level of detail provided by the extended code.

The headings for subject categories and qualifiers are all defined in English, but are also available in many language translations for use in those markets. The meaning of a particular code is the same, whichever language the heading is expressed in. So MKE is Dentistry, Zahnheilkunde (German), odontología (Spanish) or طب الأسنان (Arabic).

**How can I use Thema?**

Thema can already be used within an increasing number of the off-the-shelf product management applications from leading IT vendors. For publishers and retailers with an in-house IT system, implementing Thema is similar to implementing the established BIC subject scheme. Thema is free to use.

Once assigned, Thema codes can be embedded within industry-standard ONIX metadata:

```xml
<Subject>
  <!-- ONIX 3.0 -->
  <MainSubject/>
  <SubjectSchemeIdentifier>93</SubjectSchemeIdentifier> <!-- 93=Thema, see List 27 -->
  <SubjectSchemeVersion>1.0</SubjectSchemeVersion> <!-- version 1.0 -->
  <SubjectCode>AGA</SubjectCode> <!-- history of art -->
</Subject>
```

Thema codes for backlist titles can be assigned by mapping from existing BIC (or BISAC) subject codes. A standard mapping is available from the EDItEUR website.

It is expected that ‘reverse’ mappings – from Thema to BIC or BISAC – will also become available. These mappings will allow an organisation to do its primary frontlist classification using Thema, and to provide mapped ‘legacy’ subject codes automatically.

**Will Thema ‘take over’ from BIC and BISAC?**

It is not the aim of Thema to replace existing national schemes in the short term – it is primarily intended to be a scheme to support international communication and trade. However, as adoption of Thema grows, the need to maintain purely national schemes is reduced. There are already moves in Germany to replace WGS with Thema, and the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee has decided against further development of the BIC scheme at present, so it looks increasingly likely the BIC scheme will be superseded by Thema in the near future.

**Further information**

There is lots more information available about Thema via the EDItEUR website – all the main Thema resources are available from [www.editeur.org/151/thema](http://www.editeur.org/151/thema).

BIC members can raise questions about Thema with the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee, and information is available on our website at [www.bic.org.uk](http://www.bic.org.uk). BIC also runs a range of metadata training including courses on Thema.

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