BIC Bites

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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 *Thema* subject category scheme as a part of their business process. This BIC Bite explains what *Thema* is, and why it's the ideal scheme 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 its starting point, and added ideas from classifications used in many other countries. The first version of the *Thema* subject classification scheme was published in November 2013, and the latest version (1.3) was released in April 2018.

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 3000 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).

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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-EA (East Anglia) can be stripped to give just 1DDU (United Kingdom) for users – particularly those outside the UK – 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 other languages. 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:

```
<Subject>                                      <!-- ONIX 3.0 -->
    <MainSubject/>
    <SubjectSchemeIdentifier>93</SubjectSchemeIdentifier> <!-- 93=Thema, see List 27 -->
    <SubjectSchemeVersion>1.3</SubjectSchemeVersion>    <!-- version 1.3 -->
    <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 from BIC is available from the EDItEUR website, and a standard mapping from BISAC from BISG.

A 'reverse' mapping – from *Thema* to BIC – is also available (and a reverse mapping for BISAC is likely to become available). Reverse mappings allow an organisation to do its primary frontlist classification using *Thema*, and to provide mapped 'legacy' subject codes using the older schemes 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 across many countries, the need to maintain purely national schemes is reduced. In Germany and Scandinavia, *Thema* has already replaced earlier schemes within the national 'Books in Print' systems. In the UK, the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee has announced there will be no further development of the BIC scheme, and BIC recommends a planned migration to *Thema*. Given its overall similarity, it may be best to view *Thema* as 'the new version of BIC'. UK retailers including Waterstones and Blackwell's support *Thema*, and Amazon's 'browse by subject' is based on *Thema* across its European stores.

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 and the category browser at http://ns.editeur.org/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. BIC also runs a range of metadata training including courses on *Thema*.

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the book industry's supply chain organisation