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Processes of archival knowledge representation: historical and conceptual elements for classification and description

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Introduction

Classification and description are nuclear activities in the process of organizing and representing archives. This knowledge can be understood as all knowledge generated from the activities carried out by individuals or legal entities that result in organic information.

In Archival Science, the principle of Respect des Fonds - or Principle of Provenance, since the second half of the nineteenth century, has been considered the most important in the processes of organization and representation. Established in 1841, due to the need of the French government to solve problems of uncontrolled accumulation of documents in the National Archives after the French Revolution, the principle states that the documents produced or accumulated by a person or institution should be grouped together and kept together, thus generating the so-called archive funds.

For Duchein (1983, p. 64) "the simplest definition of *respect des fonds* means to group, without mixing them with others, the archives (documents of every kind) created by or coming from an administration, establishment, person or corporate body."

In this sense, it is understood that the documents collected in funds and\or collections reflect the knowledge produced on a particular person or specific institution, involving three main actors in this context: (1) the creator (author), the person or entity responsible for the creation of documents; (2) the user, who will use the document for

evidence, administrative, legal, social, historical and\or scientific purposes, and (3) managers, archivists, documentalists, i.e., the actors somehow responsible for the organization and socialization of this information.

Therefore, it is believed that it is possible to understand the archival representation work as a form of knowledge organization, i.e., the archivist and Archival Science as an area with an interdisciplinary relationship with Knowledge Organization, as defined by Hjørland (2008, p.86) as "activities such as document description, indexing and classification performed in libraries, bibliographical databases, and archives [...]."

We present the historical and conceptual elements of the representation process, focusing on the activities of classification and description as fundamental for organization and access to knowledge generated from organic information. To do so, we follow the classification logic as the first activity in the representation process, preceding description.

The activities of description and classification are, for the archives, whichever are the activities of classification, cataloging and indexing for libraries, i.e., the organization of archival knowledge itself.

The aim of this historical and conceptual path is to approximate typical archival processes to the theory developed in the theoretical-conceptual space of Knowledge Organization.

Archival classification: key elements for knowledge organization

Classification in the archives reality is considered a borderline activity as it bridges the activities of management and the activities of access and document preservation.

The activities of classification, as well as the description ones, were the first activities to be in some way conceptualized in theory and archival practice, developed from the nineteenth century.

The basic principles of provenance and original order will establish from the end of the nineteenth century as fundamental for archives organization.

In the early twentieth century, classification advances with reconsiderations regarding the theme with Hillary Jenkinson's publication in 1922. For the author, classification is divided into two parts: the first part is concerned with the management of

the institution, its history and organization and the second divides the files into classes and their subdivisions (JENKINSON, 1922, p 81).

Classification, as a theory, develops to the fullest from the 1950-1960 decade with the publications of Theodore R. Schellenberg, Oliver W. Holmes, Ernest Posner, Petter Scott, among other archivists and researchers from the United States and Australia's National Archives.

While the discipline progresses deeply, from the 1950s, a break that will be perpetuated over the decades to the present takes place. This rupture concerns the separation of certain activities and concepts determined by the phase the documents are.

One of the institutions responsible for that is the American National Archives, centered on the figure of Theodore R. Schellenberg, who spread and popularized his methods, separating the classification as a typical activity of active archives from the arrangement of permanent archives, initiating a systematic rupture in the discipline.

It is noted that before that, there was no difference between these functions and the most commonly used term, arrangement, was used to assign things which, for the American Archival Science, after the 1950s, are different. Eastwood makes a fundamental consideration regarding this terminological and conceptual problem. The author claims that the choice for the term "arrange" to name the process is unhappy. It implies places things in an acceptable way, in a conveninet order, such as arranging books in a bookshelf. The term classification is no longer satisfactory, as in this case it implies the arrangement or ordering of things in classes and it is better used in archival science for the process of organizing active documents (EASTWOOD, 2000, p. 93).

Classification by function is today, at the same time, the asset and the simulacrum of Archival Science, in the sense that for some authors is by that perspective that the activity is defined, such as, for example, Shepherd and Yeo (2003, our translation) "classification schemes are based on the analysis of the functions, processes and activities"

Classification is a managerial and planning activity, not only for archives, but also for administrations that generated the documents. Thus, the construction of the classification scheme should include the relations between documents, not only these,

but also the relationship between the documents and the people, thus the classification system would become a useful and facilitator tool of document description and appraisal.

Thus, classification serves as the basis for every archival organization process and obviously for archival knowledge representation.

Archival Description: historical and conceptual elements

The word description is derived from the Latin term *descriptio*, originated from the term *describere*, which means to transcribe, copy, narrate, define, distribute, put into classes, write about. Therefore, the term archival description literally means **to write about the archival material** and comprehends the representation, identification and organization of ideas.

This activity of describing archival documents has been present since ancient times, and their goals have changed over time.

In ancient times, for example, repertoires of documents were built on clay tablets, and served to avoid direct consultation to the documents, and keep the contents of archives in case of sudden shifting or in case of war or fire. In this case, the act of describing was linked to the preservation of records.

In the Middle Ages, inventories were compiled in order to provide evidence of document existence; or store the preserved material for custodians successors. Here, in addition to preserving the documents, the description had a legal objective (as it provided proof of documents' existence), and administrative, as it enabled the custodian of documents to maintain control over the funds and facilitate information retrieval for value primary purposes).

> The need for physical and administrative control was keenly felt, not only for the purpose of effective retrieval, an operation which was conducted mainly on the basis of location lists and the physical arrangement of the records themselves, but also for guaranteeing that the archival repository sewed its function of "perpetual memory." Perpetual memory is a juridical concept according to which the documents preserved in an archives are authentic and permanent evidence of past actions. This idea governed every archival endeavour until the eighteenth century, and was the main reason for the preservation as well as for the description of archival material (DURANTI, 1993, p. 49).

Although the act of describing documents has existed since ancient times, the term "archival description" and its linkage to classification, while two integrated activities, date from the nineteenth century, due to the historiographical and scientific movement of the time, which come to understand the archive as testimony to studies fundamentally related to medieval documents.

During this period, another objective is added to the activity of describing: to provide access to documents. With the opening of the archives to citizens after the French Revolution, it is noted that more people besides the creator and some academic scholars have begun to use the archival material. Therefore, adaptation and redirection of the description activity was deemed necessary, as Duranti highlights (1993, p. 50)

> [...] description has progressively lost the purposes of accounting for the holdings of the archival institution, facilitating physical retrieval of documents and providing access to information. These purposes are now fulfilled by the compilation of accession registers, location lists, indexes and all sorts of retrieval aids. The primary purpose of writing about the records has gradually become in Europe (and is beginning to become in North America) that of illuminating provenancial and contextual relationships.

Therefore, from the twentieth century, the description starts to worry less with the creation of simple search tools and subrogates of documents, and starts to focus on the document's relationship to its context, working in parallel with classification. It can be said, then, that to describe is a process that allows the archivist to represent - in the most denotative sense of the term - all knowledge that is kept in its record.

For Rodrigues (2003, p. 217), description is a key role regarding the representation of archival information and the possibility of access to them. This representation goes beyond the document, including its **functions** and **producing organs**. In this regard, the principle of *respect des funds* carries again a central role in establishing the levels that will be described.

The understanding of the description and classification as joint activities enables the existence of interdisciplinary relations between Archival Science and Knowledge Organization, allowing Archival Science new methodological theoretical approaches.

Conclusion

      Archival Science has a recent theoretical development in relation to its conceptual foundations and methodological development. We sought to present integrating aspects of archival theory, open to relations with knowledge organization aiming at an appropriation by both areas, since the archives become a space for applying methodologies of knowledge organization and Archival Science gains a new space for discussing its historical and conceptual precepts.

      Both areas have to gain from relations of this nature and studies such as this one should run more frequently and in depth targeting an increase in methodological apparatus in this universe.

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