

Ambiguity in Knowledge Organization: Four Proposed Types

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Classification and categorization order by creating or seeking certainty. Yet inevitably we encounter things that defy ready placement, which we may label *other* or *miscellaneous*, or force into another category. The literature of knowledge organization recognizes the consequences of classification and misrepresentation, but has not systematically outlined what circumstances or conditions render a thing ambiguous to those who would seek to describe it.

This paper proposes four major sources or type of ambiguity in classification. While examples of these types may be found in many disciplines and settings, they have in common similar requirements for accurate or improved representation. *Multiplicity* is a source of ambiguity when a resource or object requires more terms to describe than the system allows. *Emergence* is ambiguity that arises when phenomena, from medical observation to literary genre, is at an early stage of description and thus unstable. *Privacy-related* ambiguity is that which stems from a gap of understanding or trust between those classifying and that which is being classified, and is particularly linked to human communities. *Conditional* ambiguity arises when something requires narrative due to conditional contexts such as temporality or geography. This term also describes things that have dichotomous or fragmentary identities that are not easily represented by most systems.

These types of ambiguity may arise in formal and informal organization systems. While observing these types of ambiguity may not offer immediate or feasible solutions, it may allow us to discuss their unique challenges and to better understand their manifestations across disciplines.