Paper: The Weight of Language and Action: Epistemic Stance, Methodological Action, and Theoretical Perspective in Knowledge Organization

Abstract
Two weights, language and action, press upon knowledge organization work – both the practice and the research on the practice. Drawing on neopragmatic thought and emerging methods in analyzing knowledge organization research this paper frames the intentionality and social good arguments for evaluating our work in organizing human memory.

Résumé
Knowledge organization research is field of scholarship concerned with the design, study and critique of the processes of organizing and representing documents that societies see as worthy of preserving. In this context we are concerned with the relationship between language and action. On the one hand we are concerned with what language can and does do for our knowledge organization systems. For example, how do the words *negro* or *indian* work in historical and contemporary indexing languages. Related to this we are also concerned with how we know about knowledge organization and its languages. On the other hand we are concerned with how to act given this knowledge. That is, how do we carry out research and how do we design, implement, and evaluate knowledge organization systems.

It is important to consider these questions in the context of our work because we are delegates of the dissemination of cultural memory. We are endowed with a perspective, prepared by an education, and granted positions whereby society asks us to ensure documentary material is accessible to future generations. That is, there is a social value in our work, and as such there is a social imperative to our work. We must act with good conscious, and use language judiciously. For the memory of the world is a heavy burden.

In this paper I explore these two *weights* that bear down on knowledge organization researchers. I first explore extant literature to inventory the knowledge claims we make with regard to knowledge organization practices and systems. In order to make it clear what it is that I think we know, I will create a schematic that will link claims (language) to actions in advising, implementing, or evaluating information practices and systems.

I will draw on two forms of analysis. First I will use the concept of *elenchus* which breaks knowledge organization research into three parts: 1) forms of epistemology, 2) theory, and 3) methodology (Tennis, 2008). I will also discuss the frameworks of knowledge organization systems with another tripartite rubric called framework analysis. This breaks knowledge organization systems into 1) structures (e.g., classes and hierarchies), work practice (e.g., the act of classing documents in that structure of classes and hierarchies), and discourses of knowledge organization systems (e.g., the rhetoric and theories that inform particular kinds of classification) (cf. Tennis, 2006). In so doing I
will argue for a neopragmatic stance on the weight of language and action in knowledge organization (Rorty, 1982; 2000).

I will then close by addressing the lacuna left in neopragmatic thought – the ethical imperative to use language and action in a particular good and moral way. That is, I will address the ethical imperative of knowledge organization given its weights, epistemologies, theories, and methods. In order to do this I will review a sample of relevant work on deontology in both western and eastern philosophical schools (e.g., Kamm, 2007; Harvey, 1995; Žižek, 2008), as well as ethics discussions in knowledge organization and cognate literature (e.g., Bade, 2007; Bowker and Star, 2000).

The perspective I want to communicate is that the good borne in carrying out knowledge organization research may begin with epistemic stances (cf., language), but ultimately stands on ethical actions. I will present an analysis at two levels describing the micro and the macro ethical concerns in relation to knowledge organization research and its advice on practice. I hope this demonstrates that the direction of epistemology, theory, and methodology in knowledge organization while burdened with the dual weights of language and action, has a clear direction when provided an ethical sounding board. We know how to proceed when we understand how our work can benefit the world.

If we adopt an antifoundationalist stance, focused on utility that maximizes a social hope (Rorty, 2000) we then see that the design, implementation, and evaluation is a marriage of intentionality and utility. We design intentionally for utility, we question our implementation based on intentionality and accident, and we evaluate our KOS based on utility alongside its ability to increase sociality and reduce harm.

Though there are competing theories of theory (Smiraglia, 2002; Mai, 2002; Tennis 2008), epistemic stances (Gnoli, 2008; Hjørland 1997), and methodology, we can begin now to reflect on the weight of language and action in the context of knowledge organization systems.

Knowledge organization is an important, if not always understood, division of labor in a society that values its documentary heritage and memory institutions. Being able to do good requires us to understand how to balance the weights of language and action. We must understand where we stand and be able to chart a path forward; one that does not cause harm, but adds value to the world and those that want to access recorded knowledge. This paper will examine what we know now (according to my reading), and how we might move forward in the realm of epistemology, theory, and methodology by considering the ethical dimension of our work couched, as it is, in a deep concern for our knowing knowledge and how it should be organized.

It is our work, to date, to know how organize knowledge the right way, now perhaps by reflecting on epistemology, theory, and methodology we can act with both knowledge and intention. That is, perhaps we can balance the weight of language and action with a solid fulcrum of ethics and intention.

References


