Many roads lead to … Regensburg: reclassifying German university libraries

Viola Voß, Subject & Liaison Librarian Humanities, University and Regional Library Münster

Fine classification of books on library shelves has many difficulties.

Lyster 1897:[329]

Many German university libraries form a so-called two-track system with one central library and a range of decentralized institute or faculty libraries. The books in these libraries are often organized according to an in-house classification scheme that has been in place for decades, fitting more or less well the collections. But when it comes to merging several libraries, e.g., in a new university building, there is a problem: n formerly independent libraries means n different classification systems under the new roof, making integrating the collections or finding your way among the shelves a challenging task. Some years ago problems like these started occurring at some libraries of Münster University. A solution was found in a library further south: in Regensburg.

When four become one: merging the Münster German Studies libraries

The Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität (WWU) Münster is one of the biggest universities in Germany, with about 670 professors and an academic staff of 5,000 educating around 45,000 students in over 280 degree courses in 120 subjects. There is no central university campus in Münster: about 240 buildings are spread throughout the entire city.

The University and Regional Library (ULB) Münster is the central literature and information supply institution for the WWU, open to all students and staff of Münster University, to members of the many other educational institutions in Münster, and to all other users interested in the collections and services. Having counted 210 libraries in 1989, today the ULB library system consists of one central library and about 100 departmental and institute libraries. The collections amount to 6 million volumes with 2.6 million located at the central library and 3.4 million at the decentralized libraries.

Among the libraries merged during the last 30 years are the ones belonging to the Institute of German Philology that was re-established from four formerly independent units – German linguistics, Medieval German Literature, Modern German Literature, and Didactics of German language and literature – in 2008. The new library[1], opened in 2010 with about 142,000 volumes, faced the problem that each of the four units had used a shelf classification of its own. Although these classifications covered different key subjects there were numerous thematic and shelf mark overlaps so that they could not easily be used side by side for arranging the library holdings. Moreover, the classifications were partly outdated, their hierarchical structures were very heterogeneous, and the shelf marks were formed according to disparate principles. This situation called for the use of a different classification scheme which would allow consistent shelving of the library's media and which would be updated on a regular basis.

A thesis on a change of classification

When I took on the management of the new WWU German Studies library (GSL) in 2011, I was doing an extra-occupational master's degree in library and information science. The GSL classification problem turned out to be a possible topic for my master's thesis, allowing me to "kill two birds with one stone". So I plunged into library classification studies.

---

1. For information about the library see `https://www.uni-muenster.de/Germanistik/Bibliothek/` (only available in German).

The first part of the thesis (Voß 2013) analyses the four classifications that had been used in the former unit libraries "since time immemorial" and examines the strategies of other libraries that have had or have to deal with similar problems. A survey of several classification schemes comes to the conclusion that the old "home-made" classifications should be replaced by the so-called Regensburger Verbundklassifikation (RVK), a system developed at the university library of Regensburg. The second part of the thesis then lays the foundation for a reclassification project, considering aspects like determining GSL-specific uses of the RVK, comparing possible variants of book-processing workflows, or looking for possibilities to re-use classifying data available from other libraries.

To compare the fit of possible classification schemes, I compiled 16 criteria with regard to the content of the classifications and to formal/technical and organisational aspects, as shown in Table 1.

C.1	Relations between the GSL subject areas and the classification's classes
C.2	Ongoing maintenance of the classification
C.3	Structure and documentation
C.4	Registers/ Indices
C.5	Concordances/mappings to other classification schemes
F.1	Practicability of the scheme as shelf classification
F.2	Possibilities of thematically searching the collection via the classification
F.3	Electronic/online version of the scheme
F.4	Notations/class marks: hospitality
F.5	Notations/class marks: shortness and memorability
F.6	Notations/class marks: structural transparency
F.7	Shelf marks: IT suitability
F.8	Shelf marks: shortness, clarity, and structural transparency
O.1	Central editorial office
O.2	Number of libraries using the scheme › availability of classifying data for re-use
O.3	Suitability for daily use
	criteria with regard to C = content, F = form, O = organisation

Table 1.

Compared to other countries the "classification scheme landscape" in Germany is very diverse: there are only a few schemes that are used nationwide, while many libraries still use in-house, stand-alone solutions – like the WWU libraries in Münster. My comparison covered classification schemes of three different types: in-house classifications, specialized classifications used within German Studies (e.g. in bibliographies like BDSL[2]), and universal classification schemes like the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC), or the RVK.

I collected information about the schemes from literature and from the classifications' web-sites, and I tried to find class marks and build shelf marks on my own. Each scheme was then assessed according to the 16 criteria. The RVK was the clear winner for the purposes of the GSL.[3]

For the ensuing collection of thoughts on how the reclassification of the GSL to RVK could be carried out, I was able to fall back on a number of concepts and reports published by other libraries – e.g. Oberhauser and Seidler (2009) was helpful for their model of calculating the time needed for processing different types of books in a collection – but most information was gathered via "industrial espionage": by asking colleagues in libraries that had already undergone or were just undergoing a reclassification. They provided very helpful tips and lessons learned.

A glimpse of the Regensburg Classification

I cannot go into detail here – an appreciation of the RVK could easily fill a complete issue of Catalogue and Index! – but I would like to give at least some background information. The RVK scheme started in the 1960s as an in-house classification for the newly established Regensburg University library in Bavaria that kept its holdings in open shelves (not yet the norm for German university libraries in those days). The scheme was then adapted by other libraries, at first mainly in Southern Germany. Up until today over 140 libraries in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, or Italy (South Tyrol) have joined the RVK user group, with many more using the classification without being formally registered.

The editorial office is hosted by Regensburg University library. It collects, for example, the proposals for changes or additions to the classification that every library in the user group can contribute and that are accepted or rejected following a defined and transparent standardized process. The Regensburg colleagues also maintain the technical infrastructure for the online version of the scheme and a wiki with information for the user-group members.

The classes are organized in 34 sub classifications according to the main subjects taught at German universities. RVK class marks consist of two capital letters and 3 to 5 digits. For example, in the sub classification CA – CK "Philosophy", you'll find CC 2000 "History of Logics", or in E "General Linguistics and Literature", ER 945 is the class for "Language awareness and language skills".

The shelf marks add a location number in front and author marks (3-digit Cutter-Sanborn numbers) and holdings information after the class marks: e.g. KC/ER 945 L192 for a copy of "Women, fire, and dangerous things" by George Lakoff held at the GSL, or "KC/GE 4001 B724-3,1(3)+2" for the second copy of the third edition of volume 3,1 of a history of German literature edited by Helmut Boor. The scheme can be used either for shelving books according to the classification or for subject-indexing media using only the class marks. For more information on the RVK, see e.g. Lorenz 1998, Lorenz 2003, Voß 2017a, and the RVK website.[4]

---

[2] Bibliographie der deutschen Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft, http://www.bdsl-online.de.
[3] Interested readers can find the full matrix in Voß 2013:40. Due to their relevance for the practical usage of the schemes criteria C.1, C.2, F.1, F.8, O.1, and O.3 were doubled in the final account.
[4] Cf. https://rvk.uni-regensburg.de/. For a bibliography of (mostly German) publications about RVK see http://www.bibliothek.uni-augsburg.de/sw/rvkbibliographie.html.

From thesis to real life, or, we are not alone

With my master's thesis, I had presented a classification scheme that suits the collections and needs of the GSL, and I had planned the first steps to reclassify the library. But then, in the hurly-burly of everyday library life, this proof of concept began to collect dust: "We will start the project next month. Or the next but one. Or …"

Meanwhile other libraries in the ULB system started encountering the same kind of problems: old in-house classifications that had not kept up with the development of their subjects, plans for pooling two or more libraries in new or refurbished buildings – different libraries, different subjects, but the same difficulties. So, in June 2015, we decided to set up a "ULB RVK task force" with 12 colleagues representing 10 libraries from the departments for Catholic Theology, Chemistry & Pharmacy, Educational Studies, German Studies, History, Jewish Studies, Psychology, and Social Sciences – a broad WWU cross-section.

Luckily for us, the ULB had hired a subject specialist for Social Studies who had worked in libraries in Southern Germany that use the RVK – so we had a "fluent RVK speaker" in our team helping us a lot during our first steps into the practical work with the RVK. The goals of the RVK working group were "bundling" the different reclassification considerations undertaken so far in the respective libraries and developing joint procedures for using the RVK in WWU libraries. The to-do list covered four main tasks:

- establishing rules for adding RVK class marks and shelf marks in the local catalogue,
- developing a system of location numbers for all WWU libraries,
- developing a "planning grid" for the reclassification of WWU libraries, and
- developing an RVK manual for WWU libraries.

Beside my master's thesis, we were able to base our discussions and planning on the outcomes of another group: because of the fact that more and more German libraries were starting to use the RVK – and all were having the same kind of questions – a colleague from the library of Greifswald University set up a "Network 'Changeover to RVK'" in 2015.[5] To date members of this network have met in three workshop meetings; there is also a mailing list for exchanging questions and experiences. The topics discussed and advice provided by experienced colleagues were collected in an Excel spreadsheet. It contained many aspects to consider when changing a library classification to RVK and was available for every library to use for its own purposes.

The ULB working group filtered and sorted this extensive list according to the needs of WWU libraries and published a three-part document with preliminary considerations as well as advice for planning, preparing, and carrying out a reclassification. On the basis of the manual for RVK shelf marks by the Regensburg library, we developed a detailed manual for the use of the RVK at WWU libraries, following the Regensburg version in most aspects while refining and localizing the explanations of the different aspects to consider. As we had benefitted greatly from the material provided by the Changeover Network and the Regensburg library, we wanted to give something back to the RVK community; therefore, we published our documents so that interested colleagues can use and re-use them according to their purposes.[6]

[5.] Cf. https://rvk.uni-regensburg.de/122-beginners/144-umstieg-auf-rvk.
[6.] The changeover network's Excel file "Checkliste zur Planung Umstieg auf RVK" and the ULB information set "Zu-sam-men-stel-lung von Dokumenten zum RVK-Umstieg der AG RVK an der Uni-ver-si-täts- und Lan-des-bibliothek Mün-ster" are available at https://rvk.uni-regensburg.de/2-uncategorised/159-umstieg-auf-rvk-materialien; the manuals of Regensburg and ULB can be found at https://rvk.uni-regensburg.de/122-beginners/150-informations-und-schulungsunterlagen. Information for ULB colleagues is collected at https://www.ulb.uni-muenster.de/rvk and in an internal document sharing platform. For a more detailed overview over the ULB working group achievements see Voß (2017b).

Tools for the RVK

One of the big advantages of the RVK is that is fully and freely available online, so that first spot checks to test the classification scheme – and then later the routine work – can easily be done without any barriers or limitations. The main tool for exploring and working with the RVK is the online version provided by the library of Regensburg University.[7] It not only features the full classification that can be searched for class marks, class mark labels, or register entries, users can also start searches for media classified in a specific class in different German library networks catalogues. There is also an integrated tool for finding Cutter-Sanborn numbers. This tool can also be used in stand-alone version[8] provided by the library of Eichstätt-Ingol-stadt University, useful, e.g., when you have a list of books that already have their class mark and now need RVK shelf marks. The classification is available as Open Data in XML und MARC21-XML. In December 2017, it got licensed under CC0 to facilitate use and implementation.[9] The RVK website and the online classification scheme are only available in German, but some parts of the classification have been translated to English.[10]

To search for the class mark decisions made by other libraries for a specific book, the "ISBN tool"[11] developed at the library of Mannheim University is very helpful: Via the ISBN, it collects all data about a book available in German library catalogues, Amazon.de/com, and Google Books, and it gives links to WorldCat and other useful services. The collected library catalogue data include a list of all RVK class marks that the book in question has been assigned to; a useful overview, for example, when thinking about how to classify new books for your library.[12]

When it comes to gathering class marks for hundreds or thousands of volumes of old stock, a different solution has to be found. While there are some programs developed at several libraries that collect data for local collections from nationwide catalogues (see e.g. Pfef-fer &Eckert (2013) or Selmikeit & Oberfell (2016)), none of these is usable in the library management system setting used at WWU libraries. Our RVK working group was lucky that a colleague from ULB Digital Services compiled a script for mapping our holdings to the Bavarian catalogue (the German union catalogue with most RVK data) and for collecting the available RVK class marks. We used the lists generated by this script to reclassify the media in the WWU libraries that were changing to RVK, but we also added all RVK class marks to our central catalogue data so that they can also be used for thematic searches.

Outlook

Having completed all its tasks, the ULB RVK working group was disbanded in July 2017. Consultations, discussions, and maintenance of the manuals and training documents are coordinated by an "RVK Office" that is part of the ULB Subject Indexing Unit. The WWU libraries work independently on their reclassification projects. From time to time we discuss specific problems or exchange best practice examples.

---

7. Cf. https://rvk.uni-regensburg.de/regensburger-verbundklassifikation-online.
8. Cf. https://www-ub.ku.de/cgi-bin/cutterjo.pl.
9. Cf. https://rvk.uni-regensburg.de/regensburger-verbundklassifikation-online/rvk-download.The Wikidata entry for the RVK: https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q2137453.
10. Cf. https://rvk.uni-regensburg.de/2-uncategorised/148-uebersetzungen.
11. Cf. http://data.bib.uni-mannheim.de/malibu/isbn/suche.html. Example for a book: http://data.bib.uni-mannheim.de/malibu/isbn/suche.html?isbn=0-226-46803-8. The tool is part of the "Malibu" suite ("Mannheim library utilities"); its source code freely available: https://github.com/UB-Mannheim/malibu.
12. I only got to know this tool after finishing my master's thesis. If I had been aware of it before, it would have saved me a lot of time when performing spot checks for media examples from the different sections of the GDL collections.

To facilitate the introduction and training of librarians new to the classification – be it at WWU or anywhere else in "RVK land" – we are planning to develop a webquest, i.e., a collection of e-learning exercises similar to the quests we use for training students in information literacy.[13] And, while we feel well-equipped for the years to come, we will nevertheless keep an eye on other reclassification projects so see what we can learn from them – because many aspects of reclassification are the same, no matter what classification scheme is used.

References

Lorenz, Bernd (1998): "The Regensberg [sic] Classification: A Short Survey". *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 25.1:39–49. https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v25n01_04.

Lorenz, Bernd (2003): *The Regensburg Classification: An introduction*. http://www.bibliothek.uni-regensburg.de/Systematik/Bibliographie/regensburg_classification.pdf.

Lyster, T. W. (1897): "Notes on Shelf-Classification by the Dewey System". In: *The Library* s1-9.1:329-339. http://library.oxfordjournals.org/content/s1-9/1/329.

Oberhauser, Otto & Seidler, Wolfram (2000): *Reklassifizierung grösserer fachspezifischer Bi-bliotheksbestände: Durchführbarkeitsstudie für die Fachbibliothek für Germa-nis-tik an der Universität Wien*. Wien: Verein zur Förderung der Informations-wissen-schaft (VFI). http://eprints.rclis.org/handle/10760/8565.

Pfeffer, Magnus & Eckert, Kai (2013): "Jetzt kommt zusammen, was zusammen gehört: Ver-bund-übergreifende Datenkonsolidierung und wie man damit große Bestände effi-zient retroklassifiziert". In: Brintzinger, Klaus-Rainer & Hohoff, Ulrich (eds.): *Biblio-the-ken: Tore zur Welt des Wissens. 101. Deutscher Bibliothekartag in Hamburg 2012*. Hildesheim [u.a.]: Olms. [= Deutscher Bibliothekartag. Kongress-bände.] 92-102.

Selmikeit, Katja & Oberfell, Jörg (2016): "RVK-Umsystematisierung leicht gemacht! Signaturbildung mit dem 'Programm Oberfell'". In: *WLBforum* 18.2:12-13. http://www.wlb-stuttgart.de/fileadmin/user_upload/die_wlb/WLB-Forum/WLBforum_2016_2_WEB.pdf.

Voß, Viola (2013): *Von vier Haussystematiken zu einer Verbundklassifikation: Überlegungen zur Reklassifizierung der Bibliothek des Germanistischen Instituts der WWU Münster*. Köln: Fachhochschule, Institut für Informationswissenschaft. http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:79pbc-2013100108.

Voß, Viola (2017a): *Die Regensburger Verbundklassifikation. Ursprung, Entwicklung, Struktur & Anwendung in WWU-Bibliotheken.* https://prezi.com/bu-pdhmei21r/.

Voß, Viola (2017b): *Von KThD:IV BA Eq 5 zu BC/BG 3480 F472: Die Einführung der RVK in Bi-blio-theken der ULB Münster*. https://prezi.com/-d9ebt3pii6b/.

---

13. Cf. `https://www.ulb.uni-muenster.de/ulb-tutor/webquest/`.