APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING PROBLEMATIC LANGUAGE IN CONTROLLED VOCABULARIES
AS SEEN IN LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SUBJECT HEADINGS (LCSH)

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LCSH BASICS

Widely used controlled subject vocabulary; translated into multiple languages

Facilitates discoverability of library materials by standardizing subject terminology with a single preferred term and cross-references to variants, eliminating issues caused by variant spellings, synonyms, etc.

Originally implemented by the U.S. Library of Congress (LC), it is now a cooperative project of the Subject Authority Cooperative (SACO) program and maintained by LC

THE ISSUE WITH LCSH

LCSH reflects historical norms of past eras, but societal norms change, and language evolves, leaving outdated, problematic, even offensive terms behind

The large file size of LCSH makes it difficult to maintain a clear overview of the vocabulary

Affects FAST Headings, based on LCSH

Interest in the issue has intensified in the last ten years with little agreement on how best to address the problem

EXAMPLES OF CHANGED SUBJECT HEADINGS

Electric lamps, incandescent → Light bulbs

Electronic calculating-machines → Computers

Water closets → Toilets

Cripples → Physically handicapped → People with disabilities

Japanese Americans--**Evacuation and relocation,** 1942-1945 → Japanese Americans--**Forced removal and internment**, 1942-1945

ILLEGAL ALIENS HEADING CHANGE

Action	Subject Heading
Adopted in 1980	*Aliens, illegal*
Changed in 1993	*Illegal aliens*
Proposed in 2014 but rejected by LC	*Undocumented immigrants*
Announced in 2016 by LC but blocked by U.S. Congress	*Noncitizens + Undocumented immigration*
Adopted in 2021	*Noncitizens + Illegal immigration*

ADDRESSING PROBLEMATIC VOCABULARY

Goal:

- To facilitate discoverability and retrieval of materials using clear, current, inoffensive terminology

Methodology:

- Identify problematic terms
- Research and document appropriate substitute headings and synonyms
- Decide on approach

THREE APPROACHES TO PROBLEMATIC VOCABULARY

Local initiatives

Use other (supplementary or alternative) controlled vocabularies

LCSH change proposal

APPROACH 1: LOCAL INITIATIVES

Address the issue in a broader context with a statement on harmful language in cataloging

Replace problematic LCSH terms with a preferred heading by editing the bibliographic record

Manipulate the term being displayed in the public interface without changing the bibliographic record

APPROACH 1: LOCAL INITIATIVES PROS & CONS

Pros:

- Bypasses the LCSH change proposal process
- "Solves" problem quickly (albeit only locally)
- Allows for complete control of the substitute term, technique, and speed of the process

Cons:

- Cuts benefits of a shared controlled vocabulary
- Labor-intensive, often with duplicated efforts, e.g., local changes to bibliographic records require catalog management to resolve split files
- Subject terms chosen by a limited, localized group
- Does not address problematic terms in LCSH

APPROACH 2: USE OTHER CONTROLLED VOCABULARIES

Implement supplementary or alternative controlled vocabularies, e.g., Agricultural Thesaurus and Glossary, Getty's Art & Architecture Thesaurus, Homosaurus, Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), Wikidata

APPROACH 2: USE OTHER CONTROLLED VOCABULARIES PROS & CONS

Pros:

- Specialized vocabularies allow for greater granularity

Cons:

- Labor-intensive/additional burden on staff
- Problematic term still visible unless fully substituted
- Vocabularies produced by smaller organizations may be unstable and/or static, raising additional issues with maintenance

APPROACH 3: LCSH CHANGE PROPOSAL

Propose change to the existing LCSH, documenting reason for change

LC staff either approves or rejects the proposal as is, or requests a revision

Potentially thorny proposals are discussed at open editorial meetings

Approved headings are added to the LCSH master file with decisions posted to Summaries of Decisions from Subject Editorial Meetings

APPROACH 3: LCSH CHANGE PROPOSAL PROS & CONS

Pros:

- Collaborative approach allows for different perspectives
- Positively impacts a large community

Cons:

- Can be a slow and discouraging process
- Form of heading adopted may not be the one proposed
- Multiple related authority records may be affected
- Time and staff expenditure

WHY I SUBMITTED AN LCSH CHANGE PROPOSAL

Internal discussions at Yale of various approaches to address problematic subject headings

Staff disheartened by the difficulty in changing *Illegal aliens*, so I offered to make an LCSH change proposal to demonstrate that it **was** possible

Decided on *Slaves* because it would be a meaningful, impactful change

HOW
I SUBMITTED AN LCSH CHANGE PROPOSAL

Slaves → *Enslaved persons*

Argument: slavery is a state imposed on a person, not what they are, a subtle but important distinction

Sixty associated authority records change proposals submitted with the African American Subject Funnel Project

Announcement made, Mar. 2023, one and a half years after the project began

ORIGINAL LCSH FOR SLAVES

ARN	2118044		Timestamp	20111101 13:09:53.179Z 02118044 c 6			

Rec stat	c		Entered	19860211	Replaced 20111026213058.0		
Type	z	Upd status	a	Enc lvl	n	Source	
Roman	■	Ref status	a	Mod rec		Name use	b
Govt agn	■	Auth status	a	Subj	a	Subj use	a
Series	n	Auth/ref	a	Geo subd	i	Ser use	b
Ser num	n	Name	n	Subdiv tp	n	Rules	n

010	sh 85123347
040	DLC ‡c DLC ‡d DLC
150	Slaves
450	Enslaved persons
550	‡w g ‡a Persons
550	Slavery
670	LC database, July 21, 2011 ‡b (the enslaved)
670	Merriam-Webster unabridged, via WWW, July 21, 2011 ‡b (enslave 1 : to reduce to slavery : make a slave of <free peasants reduced to serfdom or enslaved>)

SLAVES → ENSLAVED PERSONS CHANGE PROPOSAL

☰ Modified Topical Heading   *Proposal System* ⚙

Subject heading: Enslaved persons

◀◀ ▶▶

ID:	sp 85123347	Entered:	110721	Replaced:	20220516
008/06 Geo Subd:	i-Indirect	008/11 SH System:	a-LCSH	008/29 Ref Eval:	a-Eval
008/07 Roman:	|-No attempt	008/15 Subj Use:	a-Appropriate	008/31 Rec Upd:	a-Can be used
008/09 Kind Rec:	a-Estab hdg	008/17 Type Subd:	n-Not applic	008/33 Level Estab:	a-Fully

040 $a DLC $c DLC $d DLC $d CtY
150 $a Enslaved persons
450 $w nne $a Slaves
550 $w g $a Persons
550 $a Slavery
670 $a LC database, July 21, 2011 $b (the enslaved)
670 $a Merriam-Webster unabridged, via WWW, July 21, 2011 $b (enslave 1 : to reduce to slavery : make a slave of <free peasants reduced to serfdom or enslaved>)
670 $a Enslaved people in Canada, 2019: $b page 2 (juvenile literature on slavery in Canada)
670 $a Enslaved peoples of the historical slave trade, 2020- $b (digital collection of records and datasets on the lives of individuals who were enslaved, participated in the historic trade, or worked to free them) $u https://enslaved.org/
670 $a George Mason University website, viewed March 4, 2022: $b Enslaved Children of George Mason project About page (the project reconstructs the lives of enslaved children and adults on Gunston Hall Plantation; project researchers used the term 'enslaved' (individual, person, etc.), because the noun 'slave' puts the focus on the individuals' low status while the adjective 'enslaved' signals that they are complex beings defined by more than the bondage and low social and legal status imposed on them) Enslaved People of George Mason Project page (a student-led project reconstructing the stories of people who were enslaved on Mason's plantation; includes links to the Enslaved Children of George Mason project and resources related to the campus' new Enslaved People of George Mason Memorial) $u https://www.gmu.edu/
670 $a Mount Vernon website, viewed March 4, 2022 $b (includes an Enslaved People of Mount Vernon Tour and a Database of Mount Vernon's Enslaved Community) $u https://www.mountvernon.org/
670 $a Underground Railroad Education Center website, viewed August 22, 2021: $b the vocabulary of freedom page (the word 'slave' denies the humanity of the enslaved person while 'enslaved person' recognizes that their enslaved state is imposed on them and not inherent to their identity as a human) $u https://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/the-vocabulary-of-freedom/
670 $a Teaching Hard History, 2018: $b page 23 (study on teaching American slavery by the Southern Poverty Law Center shows that 49% of teachers use 'enslaved persons,' a term that emphasizes the humanity of enslaved people) $u https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/tt_hard_history_american_slavery.pdf
670 $a Telling the story, 2021 $b (most historians now refer to 'enslaved people' rather than 'slaves' to separate the person's identity from their circumstance) $u https://www.buffalolib.org/sites/default/files/exhibit/pdf/Vocab%20&%20Key%20Concepts%20-%20mc.pdf
670 $a "Why Grammarly's new suggestions for writing about slavery were always going to miss the mark," Slate, February 8, 2022 $b (since January 18, 2022, Grammarly Premium, a popular writing-assistant app, began suggesting substitutions for words relating to slavery in response to user research and input from subject specialists on race and ethnicity; the writer acknowledges that the issue is complex for some terms but thinks that the suggested substitution of 'enslaved person' for 'slave' is the most widely practiced and natural) $u https://www.tigerdroppings.com/rant/o-t-lounge/grammarlys-new-suggestions/101200192/
670 $a "Language matters," Chicago tribune, Sept. 6, 2010 $b (subtitle: "The shift from 'slave' to 'enslaved person' may be difficult, but it's important"; points out that a recent article published in The New York Times studiously avoided the word 'slaves' in favor of variations of 'enslaved'; acknowledges the arguments for and against such changes but concludes that while shifts in terminology may initially seem forced and awkward, adopting new terminology is the first step in transformation of language; equates it to the initial negative reaction to 'African Americans' which is now widely accepted) $u https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/eric-zorn/ct-column-slave-enslaved-language-people-first-debate-zorn-20190906-audknctayrarfijimpz6uk7hvy-story.html
910 $a Proposal saved by js07 on 05/16/2022 at 08:37:36
907 $t 0 $a Slaves $e Rowena.Griem@Yale.edu $i sh 85123347 $m 1319679058003 $r Coop $s rescheduled $x 0
952 $a Bib. records to be changed: (approximately 5000+)

SLAVES → ENSLAVED PERSONS: CHANGE PROPOSAL EXCERPT

040 __	|a DLC |c DLC |d DLC |d CtY
150 __	|a Enslaved persons
450 __	|w nne |a Slaves
550 __	|w g |a Persons
550 __	|a Slavery
670 __	|a LC database, July 21, 2011 |b (the enslaved)
670 __	|a Merriam-Webster unabridged, via WWW, July 21, 2011 |b (enslave 1 : to reduce to slavery : make a slave of <free peasants reduced to serfdom or enslaved>)
670 __	|a Enslaved people in Canada, 2019: |b page 2 (juvenile literature on slavery in Canada)
670 __	|a Underground Railroad Education Center website, viewed August 22, 2021: |b the vocabulary of freedom page (the word 'slave' denies the humanity of the enslaved person while 'enslaved person' recognizes that their enslaved state is imposed on them and not inherent to their identity as a human) |u https://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/the-vocabulary-of-freedom/
670 __	|a Teaching Hard History, 2018: |b page 23 (study on teaching American slavery by the Southern Poverty Law Center shows that 49% of teachers use 'enslaved persons,' a term that emphasizes the humanity of enslaved people) |u https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/tt_hard_history_american_slavery.pdf
670 __	|a Telling the story, 2021 |b (most historians now refer to 'enslaved people' rather than 'slaves' to separate the person's identity from their circumstance) |u https://www.buffalolib.org/sites/default/files/exhibit/pdf/Vocab%20&%20Key%20Concepts%20-%20mc.pdf
688 __	|a Heading changed from Slaves to Enslaved persons in March 2023.
952 __	|a Bib. records to be changed: (approximately 5000+)

SLAVES → ENSLAVED PERSONS: RELATED HEADINGS

Field	Previous Record	Current Record
150 680	Auctorati Here are entered works on persons in the Roman Empire who hired themselves out for fighting as gladiators and whose condition was close to that of slaves.	Auctorati Here are entered works on persons in the Roman Empire who hired themselves out for fighting as gladiators and whose condition was close to that of enslaved persons.
150 450	Slaves' writings, Cuban Cuban slaves' writings	Enslaved person's writings, Cuban Cuban enslaved persons' writings
150 550	Women slaves Slaves	Enslaved women Enslaved persons

WHAT NOW?

It is our ethical imperative as catalogers to ensure that subject vocabularies are clear, up to date, and without apparent bias or offense

Encourage submissions/involvement from patrons and library staff, especially those who interact with users

Record and discuss terms via a centralized dashboard to solicit feedback from a broad section of society

Address problematic headings as they are identified to keep up with inevitable language and societal changes

SELECTED ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baron, Jill E., Sawyer Broadley. *Change the Subject*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth Digital Library Program, 2019.
Documentary on Dartmouth College students who fought to change the LCSH from *Illegal aliens*, inspiring others to look at subject headings more critically.

Berman, Sanford. *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*. Jefferson, N.C., McFarland, 1993.
Seminal work on the need to address outdated and problematic LCSHs, originally published in 1971.

Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee. "A Code of Ethics for Catalogers." Accessed August 14, 2023.
Includes links to their "Cataloging Code of Ethics," which provides a framework for approaching cataloging from an ethical standpoint, and a "Cataloging Ethics Bibliography."

Cataloging Lab. "Topics: Subjects." Accessed August 5, 2023.
Wiki supporting LCSH change proposals, including lists of problem LCSHs, alternative vocabularies, library/archive statements on bias in description, etc.

Library of Congress. *Library of Congress Authorities.* Accessed August 5, 2023.
Browsable version of LC's subject, name, title, and name/title files.

Library of Congress. *Subject and Genre/Form Headings*. Last modified March 3, 2022.
Links to LCSH subject resources, including instructions on revising subject headings, the most recent tentative list, the summary of decisions, and the downloadable *Subject Heading Manual* and latest published edition of LCSH.

Library of Congress. *Subject Heading and Term Source Codes*. Last modified July 20, 2023.
List of additional, often specialized, subject vocabularies, some with links to the resource.