

Xenoglossophobia

taming the fear of all the jargon

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ABSTRACT

Feeling overwhelmed by cataloguing jargon? This paper examines xenoglossophobia - the anxiety caused by unfamiliar jargon - within the evolving landscape of bibliographic standards. It traces the evolution of terminology from AACR2 through FRBR and the IFLA Library Reference Model, highlighting how changes have overwhelmed professionals. The author advocates confidence-building strategies, open-access resources like the RDA Registry, and cross-disciplinary learning, particularly from computer science. By encouraging collaboration, self-service strategies, and continuous learning the article advocates for sustained professional development to ensure adaptability and resilience in metadata workflows. Make jargon work for you, not against you!

KEYWORDS RDA; jargon; metadata standards; RDA Toolkit; RDA Registry

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Xeno-glosso-what?

There is no little irony in titling a jargon-busting article with a term from studies into language acquisition which is derived from the Greek, but I am grateful to UK Committee on RDA (UKCoR) Chair Anastasia Kerameos for suggesting it to me since I believe it really does sum up the barrier I see most often in the training room – a fear (*phobia*) of foreign (*xeno*) languages (*glosso*).

In fact jargon-busting is such a powerful tool in the cataloguing training room that I don't even ask clients if they want it – it's fundamental to making the room a safe space and I open nearly every session by repeating my observation that despite the fact we all acknowledge cataloguing and metadata as jargon-heavy, we lapse into it and that as a result nobody should ever feel (or be made to feel) uncomfortable for asking what a word or acronym means. "Few cataloguers do it on purpose," I say. "Nobody springs forth from the womb knowing instinctively that MARC 245 is the title field. And yet, put a bunch of us in a room together and we'll all start '245ing' at the drop of an unthinking hat. Asking us to explain what something means is doing us a favour and saving us from ourselves."

“The” Glossary

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in Anglo-American cataloguing the jargon we used remained largely stable until the 1990s. We could locate most of the terms we needed in ‘Appendix D: Glossary’ of AACR2 (*Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* 2nd edition)¹, and we soon learned that these followed a long tradition of cataloguing vocabulary in the classic texts we studied at library school: Charles Cutter, Charles Jewett, S. R. Ranganathan, Antonio Panizzi, and the (in)famous Mr Dewey were baked in, alongside various publications from the Library of Congress, OCLC and the British Library. If we hadn’t attended library school ourselves, we could ask trusted colleagues, and they would provide explanations and point us to the core texts. Our jargon came from a limited range of sources and was, comparatively speaking, easy to assimilate. New professionals arrived at workplaces with fresh buzzwords that kept our communal, internalised glossary refreshed and up-to-date, and conferences and LIS-serves gave us opportunities to ask questions without fear of judgement.

FRBRisation

As a library student in the 1990s who had a Masters in English Literature and did not approve of the post-modern separation of Poetry into that favoured by the general reader and that studied in the academic canon, it was with great trepidation that I observed the development, promotion and reception of *Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records* (FRBR)². In early draft form and fuelling some of the exciting class activities in our computer labs (to which only Library and Information Science, Computer Studies and Economics students had automatic access in my year-group), it was not something I found I could discuss with my then cataloguing mentors. They regarded it as a purely academic exercise and something for “the techies” to worry about.

At CIG³ conferences speakers from the British Library gave inspiring overviews but the general atmosphere was that what we know now as the WEMI (Work Expression Manifestation Item) model was a “nice to know” rather than a “need to know”. Cataloguers seemed divided into those who believed it would help the LMS vendors facet our catalogues and those who worried very intensely that how *we* did *our* jobs would change drastically.

For generations, those working outside the specific areas of rare books and music cataloguing were concerned with starting with the *publication in hand* (most often called “the book in hand”) and working outwards from it to record information that could be predicted to help a notional library user find it. In music there was a need to record more nuanced relationships and in rare books we worked with the concept of Bibliography of *the ideal work* (the publication as close as we could uncover it to its

¹ [Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR, 2005](#)

² [IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, 1998](#) and [IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, 2009](#)

³ CILIP Cataloguing and Indexing Group, known today as CILIP Metadata & Discovery Group.

state as it rolled off the printing press before the passage of time left us with only a fragment of the materials output by the Early Modern printroom), but these were regarded as specialisms and had their own plenteous literature providing their own vocabulary and jargon for practitioners within them.

And lo, it came to pass that as FRBR became more embedded in our way of thinking and ultimately was expanded into what we now know as the IFLA LRM (Library Reference Model)⁴ which in turn became the Ur-text for modern cataloguing, embedded as it is in all other standards and guidelines, cataloguers who had not realised that it was indeed a revolution in thinking about how we catalogue, became increasingly bombarded with new terminology at such a rapid pace that it felt somewhat overwhelming. And xenoglossophobia took hold, first of individuals, then of groups, then of the majority of our professional class.

Tackling the Issue Head On

If you accept my assertion that Anastasia has identified the name for our pain (xenoglossophobia), then we can start to take steps to diminish it. I've read a lot of academic literature about it the last few months and really like the summary Lingoda published on its blog ([Maciejewski Cortez, 2024](#)). It shares the steps the academic articles agree can "cure" the infection:

1. **Identify and understand your fear.** ...
2. **Improve your confidence.** ...
3. **Be easy on yourself.** Remember that you are a learner. ... [Since cataloguing models are in constant beta, we are all learners, always]
4. **Lower the stakes.** Seek out one-on-one conversations ...
5. **Accept your mistakes.** Don't be discouraged by ... a mistake.

As with most of my writing, in this article I am tackling item 2 in Lingoda's list. Specifically, I hope to help you improve your confidence in cataloguing language by highlighting several sources that you can use to self-serve when you encounter jargon that confuses you. As with all acts of information literacy, I am assuming that you will ask trusted colleagues, because the research consistently shows us that is what human beings do. (As a side note, I have assumed over the years that the general outcry about Too Much Jargon comes from an increase in conversations about jargon that do not arrive at a nice pithy answer – so that not only the person who asks the question, but the trusted colleague is left wondering if they have the meaning quite clear).

⁴ [Riva, P., Le Bœuf, P. and Žumer, M., 2024](#)

Two Glossaries

As sure as AACR2 became RDA (*Resource Description and Access*), the Glossary in the RDA Toolkit became the first place to check when you don't know what a term means. Indeed, often it is the case that the text of the Toolkit is the place in which one encounters a piece of cataloguing vocabulary for the first time. For example, when people encounter the RDA text for the first time, it is not uncommon for them to encounter the instruction "Record a structured description" and it is not unreasonable for them to wonder what the authors of RDA mean, precisely by **a structured description**. The Glossary provides this definition:

"A recording method that is a human-readable string that is a full or partial description of an entity that is based on a string encoding scheme, or is a controlled term that describes an aspect of an entity. Includes an access point or a controlled term taken from a vocabulary encoding scheme." (['Glossary', 2025](#))

It is highly likely (and highly recommended) that they then look up "string encoding scheme". In the Glossary they will find that a **string** is defined as "A sequence of signs, symbols, or a combination of signs or symbols, intended to be treated as a unit." (['Glossary', 2025](#)) **String encoding scheme** is defined as "A set of string values and an associated set of rules that describe a mapping between that set of strings and a value of an element" (['Glossary', 2025](#)) and there are two useful *Use for* notes, which provide the acronym **SES** and another term that is being treated within RDA as a string encoding scheme, **syntax encoding scheme**. Those with backgrounds in Linguistics or Computer Science may be able to debate whether these are equivalent or not, but "*Use for syntax encoding scheme*" lets us know that within RDA we should treat them as the same thing. In other words, this *Use for* is a classic Scope Note as we would understand it within classical cataloguer jargon – it defines within this resource a term that, perhaps, outside this resource could be understood in a different more nuanced way.

Within the RDA Toolkit, as well as appearing in the Glossary, each element has its definition at the top of its webpage. For example, we find the page for **court reporter corporate body** (Entities > Expression > court reporter corporate body) opens with its "Definition and Scope" as "A corporate body who contributes to an expression by preparing the opinions of a court for publication." (['court reporter corporate body', 2019](#))

If you or your organisation does not subscribe to the RDA Toolkit, you may be wondering how you would find these definitions. The answer is that while the Toolkit itself is a commercial product subject to the same copyright laws as any other, its publishers and the RDA Board and RDA Steering Committee also publishes an Open Access resource on Github, the *RDA Registry*⁵. Here you can find the definitions whenever you encounter them in the general RDA cataloguing literature. To take our example of **court reporter corporate body** we can see that the Registry has defined the

⁵ <https://www.rdaregistry.info>

label “has court reporter corporate body” as “Relates an expression to a corporate body who contributes to an expression by preparing the opinions of a court for publication.” ([‘has court reporter corporate body’, 2025](#))

You can see that even if you have no need to use the Registry for technical purposes (such as setting up a Linked Data project), you can use it as a *de facto* Glossary.

Computer Science Vocabulary

You may be wondering why the Registry provides its definitions in a slightly different structured format from the Toolkit itself. The answer is that the Registry’s primary purpose is to provide “linked data and Semantic Web representations of the entities, elements, and terminologies approved by the RDA Steering Committee (RSC)” ([RDA Registry, 2025](#)). It is used by designers of LIMS and apps and, indeed, is used within the RDA Toolkit itself to ensure that the Glossary and other locations of definitions are consistent.

The use I am highlighting, as a human being who wants to understand terminology, is a secondary one. And this, in turn, highlights the point at which many cataloguers began to feel that they had fallen behind with new cataloguing vocabulary. FRBR was not, as some people believed in the 1990s, a document that was the business of systems librarians, LMS vendors and others with a specialist set of technical skills within libraries. It was, arguably, the first of a set of documents that highlighted the increasingly technical set of skills that has become core within the library profession. Whereas in the days of the card and the dictionary catalogue (the primary technology when I entered the profession in the early 1990s) a strong set of critical skills was often assumed – the old cliché into which I too fall of studying Literature at undergraduate level and then taking a Masters in LIS, and knowledge of Computing seen as an “added extra”, now we see the curriculum for career entrants remains focused on Customer Service and Management but has emphasised technical knowledge to such an extent that there has had to be a call for an increase in critical thinking to be taught explicitly.

The LRM and RDA heralded a set of vocabulary that has been seen by many of us as “new” whilst those from a computing background have been familiar with it for a very long time and are interested only in the scope notes that Librarianship applies. Terms like **application profile**, **range**, **element**, and **entity diagram** felt alien and, quite frankly baffling, to many of us when we first encountered FRBR and then Original RDA. When I encountered terms I thought of as “computer-y” at cataloguing conferences, I followed my hunch and very quickly learned to have my phone ready at Google so I could search for “computer science [new-to-me term] definition.” Try it for yourself:

- Computer science “application profile” definition
- Computer science “range” definition
- Computer science “element” definition
- Computer science “entity diagram” definition

Of course, where LRM defines a specific definition, or RDA does, we should always go by that, but as someone whose mother tongue is Scots (only recently recognised by the Scottish Parliament as an official language of Scotland), still today I often have to look up English words for things, or double-check if a word I use is actually Scots and not English. So why wouldn't Computer Scientists use terms from their professional language without perhaps realising they were specialist at all?

In short: if you find yourself confused by a new term, consider it may be an old term within Computer Science and use a Computer Science subject glossary for it.

The Extent of the Issue

Some of the vocabulary I have used in this article, and certainly the ways to find its definitions, may help you to unpack the next big topic that is under discussion within RDA. Thomas Brenndorfer and the other members of the Extent Working Group have been dealing with inconsistencies of which we are aware in how extent (such as the number of leaves or pages in a book and the running time of a recording of music) is recorded. In MARC terms, we are in the 3XX area⁶. Out for constituency review at the moment is a suite of proposals that aims to make the approach we take as cataloguers more consistent across different formats and disciplinary backgrounds ([Ready for Feedback: Proposals from the Extent Working Group, 2025](#)). This includes disciplinary issues like the rare books cataloguing community's approach to pages versus leaves and cultural issues like the Jewish cataloguing community's need for numbering to be dealt with in a way that makes the way their religious books are numbered no longer seen as an exception to a "norm" that was established in a limited cultural environment.

The proposals also consider the use of **SES** (those **String Encoding Schemes**) to which I alerted you earlier in this article, and which, much like **Application Profiles** has been oft-quoted as the jargon that has broken the will of many an experienced cataloguer who does not have a degree in Computer Science.

The UKCoR is keen to receive feedback from UK cataloguers on these proposals, and I commend them to you as a good way to develop your vocabulary hunter skills. None of the vocabulary used is jargon for its own sake – it's all modern cataloguing vocabulary that I would argue it is useful to know.

Start with the Glossary (Toolkit if you have it, Registry if you don't). If you do have Toolkit access, make use of the Guidance section.

If you come across terms that aren't in the Glossary and aren't "standard common English" ask yourself whether they might be "standard common English" to someone who has training in Computer Science and see if you can track them down that way, the way that non-legally-trained law librarians have to learn the vocabulary of the Law. Know that as a librarian, we each have special skills in tracking down and learning the

⁶ '3XX - Physical Description, Etc. Fields - General Information', 2024

subject disciplines of our library users, and that by using these skills we have, in fact, nothing to fear.

And if you really get stuck, post a question to the UKCoR's email list, LIS-RDA⁷. It's our own friendly, UK list, separate from the RDA-L on ALA Core⁸, and nobody there will judge you.

Finally, What Does an RDA Application Look Like?

Well, as a self-confessed old-timer English Lit graduate, and speaking purely for myself and not for any of my clients or previous employers, I am happy to say that it can be a spreadsheet, or it can be a set of Policy Statements in the Toolkit (set your Toolkit to show BL Policy Statements for an example of this), or it can be a wiki that links to the Toolkit after or before sharing your internal policy choices.

And, as a rare books person in my soul, I always point people to the cataloguing manual DCRM (*Descriptive Cataloguing of Rare Materials RDA Edition*)⁹ which is structured in the same way as its predecessor DCRM, but links through to the appropriate parts of the Toolkit as well as providing examples and specific policy choices that the editors have made. The editors are also providing Policy Statements embedded in the Toolkit for the convenience of those of us who catalogue rare books and have access to the Toolkit.

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⁷ <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=LIS-RDA>

⁸ See https://www.rdatoolkit.org/join_RDAL for joining instructions.

⁹ <https://rbms.info/dcrm/dcrm/>

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