

MSL (MARC as a second language)

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Abstract: The goal of this column is to decode and introduce MARC for new library professionals in an approachable and welcoming manner.

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The *Online Dictionary for Library and information Science* (2017) defines MARC as “an international standard digital format for the description of bibliographic items developed by the Library of Congress during the 1960s to facilitate the creation and dissemination of computerized cataloging [...]” This definition only hints at MARC’s long-evolving historical practice and steep learning curve. Over time, the format has developed its own peculiar jargon, localized around and spoken fluently by those working with MARC-encoded metadata. Shorthand phrases such as “the subfield \$b in the 245,” “the second indicator accommodates the non-filing characters,” or “the 490 needs to be traced” not only concern the MARC format itself, but also involve complex bibliographic concepts overlapped with content standards and local cataloging policies. This jargon, or MARC-speak, can be as difficult to decode as the data itself. The goal of this column is to decode this jargon, making MARC more accessible to the new library professional.

New library professionals should learn some rudimentary MARC basics. There are three reasons why: Today, Tomorrow, and the Future. Today, library listservs and job lists are replete with position advertisements for metadata and cataloging specialists. Scrolling through the archives of RDA-L, Autocat, the PCCList, or any similar listserv illuminates a serious need for both MARC and non-MARC metadata expertise. Tomorrow, production catalogs will embrace the Bibliographic Framework (a.k.a. BIBFRAME), a linked data model for bibliographic description and envisioned MARC successor, but today MARC is still commonly used. Finally, the more librarians who understand the inherited bibliographic universe today, the more empowered we will be to create the future’s bibliographic universe and leave our own data legacy in turn. MARC has direct impact on, and is impacted by, new librarians in the field. It is encountered daily in our catalogs, buried deep under discovery layers, heard in departmental banter, and utilized to troubleshoot problematic data. For good or ill, it has given form to our bibliographic data. So, without further ado, let’s jump into our first MARC as a Second Language

lesson, which will cover some rudimentary parts of a MARC record and commonly encountered MARC content designation.

“What exactly is the subfield \$b in the 245?” The short version is that the subfield \$b in the 245 is a vehicle. All MARC “serves as a vehicle for bibliographic data of all types from any organization” (Library of Congress, 2006). The remaining 618 words of this column will constitute the longer version. It is easier to show a subfield \$b in the 245 with an example. Here is a Title Statement from a MARC record where the subfield \$b and its contents are highlighted in blue:

245 10 \$aVehicles :\$b hide and sneak /\$c by Bastien Contraire.

The subfield \$b is preceded by a dollar sign which is called a delimiter. It serves as a boundary that separates the data into different parts called subfields. The delimiter can be displayed in various systems as a dollar sign (\$), a double dollar sign (\$\$), a pipe symbol (|), or a double dagger (‡). There are two other subfields besides \$b in this Title Statement example, namely subfield \$a and subfield \$c. In the Title Statement, the subfield \$a includes data for the Title Proper, the subfield \$b includes data for the Remainder of Title, and the subfield \$c includes data for the Statement of Responsibility. There are many subfields defined for the 245 and each serves as a vehicle for a specific piece of title-related data.

The subfield \$b in this example has the contents “hide and sneak.” The content of the subfield \$b constitutes the Remainder of Title. The Remainder of Title is the data that comes between the Title Proper, the primary name of the bibliographic item located in subfield \$a, and the first author statement located in subfield \$c. The rules regarding capitalization, abbreviation, and punctuation are dictated by the content standard. Content standards include the Anglo American Cataloging Rules 2 (AACR2), and Resource Description Access (RDA), among others.

The entire line is called a variable field. Every variable field begins with a three-character numeric code. In this case, it's the 245. The three-character numeric code is called a tag. The 245 is the tag for the Title Statement. The 245 is a non-repeatable tag. There can only be one 245 in each MARC record. A fluent MARC-speaker will say it is THE 245 (emphasis on THE). Each variable field has defined subfields. Subfield \$b in the 245 is a vehicle for a different kind of metadata than a subfield \$b that might be encountered in a MARC variable field with a different numeric tag, such as the \$b in a 300 or the \$b in a 264. Just like tags, certain subfields can also be non-repeatable. The subfield \$a, subfield \$b, and subfield \$c in the 245 are non-repeatable. There can only be one of each subfield within a 245. The MARC bibliographic standard will indicate which fields are repeatable by use of (R) and non-repeatable fields by use of (NR).

The subfield is one of two types of content designation in a variable field. In addition to subfields, every variable field also has two indicators. In the above example, the number one and the number zero that come directly after the 245 field tag are the indicators. Like the subfields, these indicators are defined differently for each numeric tag. Indicators will be the topic of discussion for the next Marc as a Second Language column.

This MARC as a Second Language column introduced some basic MARC concepts including subfields, variable fields, tags, indicators, and delimiters. The goal of this column is to decode MARC jargon, making it more accessible to the new library professional. The knowledge of how MARC has shaped our bibliographic universe can be a useful tool to all librarians and most particularly empowering to those new to the profession.

Heard a good bit of MARC-speak recently that you would like explained? Email it to kkdavis@umn.edu, and watch this space for an upcoming segment of MSL (MARC as a Second Language).

References

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