

Disciplinarity, Inter-disciplinarity and Post-disciplinarity: Changing Disciplinary Patterns in the History Discipline

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Abstract

The aim of this text is to discuss some aspects of the concept of discipline from the standpoint of LIS by showing how “epistemological mutations” in the discipline of history have changed its traditional epistemological starting points and thus the way knowledge in the domain of history is organized. Something that in its prolongation maybe appears as a new kind of disciplinarity (due to epistemological changes) in the field of humanities and social science, that at the same time is challenging the conception of traditional and historical given disciplines. A basic assumption is that bibliographical classification schedules, categories, and classes cannot be regarded apart from some kind of sociological, ideological or epistemological meta-understanding. Accordingly, when this meta-understanding change, also the principles for knowledge organization alter.

Keywords: Disciplinarity, Domain analysis, History, Knowledge organization, The linguistic turn.

Resumen

El objetivo de este texto es tratar algunos aspectos relativos al concepto de disciplina desde el punto de vista de la Ciencia de la Información (LIS) mostrando como “las mutaciones epistemológicas” en la disciplina de Historia han transformado su punto de partida epistemológico tradicional y, por tanto, la manera en que el conocimiento es organizado en el dominio de la Historia. Esta nueva organización puede ser vista como un nuevo tipo de disciplinabilidad (debido a los cambios epistemológicos) en el área de las humanidades y de las ciencias sociales y, a la vez, como un reto para las disciplinas históricas tradicionales. El punto de partida es que las categorías y clases de las clasificaciones bibliográficas no pueden ser consideradas independientemente de cierta meta-comprensión sociológica, ideológica o epistemológica. Por tanto, cuando dicha meta-comprensión cambia, se alteran, asimismo, los principios de organización del conocimiento.

Palabras Clave: Análisis de dominio, Cambio lingüístico, Disciplinariedad, Historia, Organización del conocimiento.

1 Introduction

In questions about disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are also interwoven questions about disciplinarity. Here, the concept of disciplinarity is regarded as the disciplinary identity, as the basic assumptions that hold the discipline together, that give it its coherence, e.g. what the people in the discipline agree upon, a common object of research, a set of common theoretical assumptions. Yet, the concept of scientific disciplines, although it is a basic concept in all kinds of knowledge organization (KO) as the social organization of science in the universities, the different subjects in elementary schools, the categories of the bibliographic classification systems, etc, is not simple. Something that can be understood, for example by reading a report from the Swedish Research Council “Tvärvetenskap – en analys” [Interdisciplinarity – an analysis] from 2005, where the authors point out that there is more written by the historians of science about the struggle on the demarcation line between science and non-science, then about the question “what is a discipline” (Sandström et al., 2005, p. 21).

In the field of Library and Information Science (LIS), and especially in the case of Knowledge Organization, concepts such as disciplines and disciplinary identities, are first and foremost to be regarded as pragmatic tools to be used in order to organize, store, and retrieve information. E.g. we are talking about words, the thing that the word stands for, and about terms that correspond to certain concepts or conceptual spaces.

In this manner, a crucial question is related to the boundaries of the concept. In a subject search we assume that under the word “history” also are found issues related to the concept of “history”. But what are we talking about when we are talking about history? Are we talking about the frontline of the actual research? Or are we talking about the curriculum reproduced in scholarly text books? Or, are we talking about different kinds of non-academic history production, popular history in different media, or different types of amateur research? Or are we talking about a domain defined according to library classification schemes? Or, is there at all any meaningful and coherent item behind the word?

Yet, the aim the paper that emerges from my PhD-project is not to discuss all these aspects. Rather, from the standpoint of LIS to demonstrate how meta-understandings in the history discipline changes. Agreeing with Birger Hjørland and his domain analytic approach to LIS, ex. (Hjørland, 1995, 2004), my basic assumption is that bibliographical classification schedules, categories, and classes, cannot be regarded separately from different kinds of disciplinary meta-understandings. Instead, any form of knowledge organization reflects these meta-understandings. Accordingly, if these meta-understandings, e.g. the disciplinarity, change, also the principles for knowledge organization, and even the disciplinary boundaries, alter. Thus, in a domain analytic approach I want, first, point out three different types of history, e.g. three different types of disciplinarity that in turn induce different kinds of classification principles. Secondly, give some indications that these disciplinary changes, by challenging the conception of traditional and historical given disciplines, maybe end up in a new kind of disciplinarity in a unified field of humanities and social sciences.

2 Activity Theory

An approach that has very much in common with Domain Analysis, which I have found fruitful for my own work, is the so-called Activity Theory (AT), a Soviet psychological meta-theory. AT is above all concerned with practice, with doing. Thus, the activity is understood as the basic unit for the understanding of human behaviour. Important sources of inspiration are the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotskij (1896–1934) and his colleagues Aleksej Leontiev (1903–1979) and Aleksandr Luria (1902–1977), but also the theorist and philosopher of language Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975).

Activity is basically defined by a common goal or outcome, a special purpose shared by a group of people.

Another basic assumption is that the activity is always mediated by artefacts. The term artefact encompasses a general conception of tools as material objects, but in AT, artefacts have to be regarded with a more expanded significance that includes human language as well as norms, conventions, rites, myths, social relations etc. Artefacts, thus, can be interpreted in a general way, to include any representation used as a mediator in the activity, whether internal or external to the subject, but also to mediate between the individual and the community. Due to its socio-cultural aspect, that the activity is always embedded in a societal context, and has a historical and, in this matter, changing nature. Activity theory thus incorporates strong notions of intentionality, history, mediation, collaboration and development in constructing.

The activity approach signifies a stress on the material and socio-cultural aspects of language. Instead of thinking about language as something that basically *means* different things, this approach regards language as something that *does* things, and in that matter, instead of searching for definitions, regarding the concept in relation to a certain *activity*. Thus, to understand a word, is to understand the activity it represents.

A way to understand a discipline is to regard it as an activity. To understand the rules and the tools in play in the discipline is a way to reach the disciplinary meta-understanding demanded by the Domain Analysis approach.

3 The “scientific”

Talking about rules, one important feature of the disciplinary concept is their relation to the field of science and to the adverbial form “scientific”. To be a scientific discipline is not only to be a certain specialization, a part of the societal division of labour, but also to be something related to a normatively given discourse of knowledge. That means, in order to be regarded as a scientific discipline, the activity must fulfil a certain scientific standard, be following a certain scientific rule.

Although this standard has always been under discussion, nevertheless, to the basic features of the very concept of science belongs a notion of knowledge as a unified and universal discourse, a certain method that guaranties a scientific standard, but also the idea of science as a cumulative and progressive process. Here also the notion of disciplines as ever growing bodies of knowledge. Closely related to this, one can find the notion that science only deals with the empiric observable world. In this manner, one can regard the disciplines as more or less natural – ontological given – branches of the total knowledge of the world, defined by

normative given demarcation borders for what science is and what is not. In order to describe this totality of knowledge, Francis A Miksa introduces the word “Knowledge Universe” (Miksa, 1998), where every discipline has its own place and its own task. In the field of LIS the obvious examples are the universal classification schedules that could be regarded as maps of the relations between the different disciplines where the border of one discipline also demarks the beginning of another.

Yet, this way of looking upon science, as a unified field, is above all a normative given top-down understanding of science, that sometimes contradicts the bottom-up understanding offered by AT, in turn more related to a descriptive understanding offered for example by science studies. What science studies do is, among other things, to demonstrate the historicity of values that pretends to be universal. In this matter Michel Foucault explains by four operations the process in the 18th century which made it possible to start talking about science in the singular. As Foucault states it, “[how] plural, polymorphous, multiple, and dispersed existence of different knowledges” become scientific disciplines that took place in a united scientific discourse:

- “[E]liminating or disqualifying” non-scientific knowledge,
- “[N]ormalizing these knowledges that makes it possible to fit them together, to make them communicate with one another”,
- “The hierarchal classification of knowledge that allows them to become [] interlocking, starting with the most particular, and material knowledges”.
- [A] pyramidal centralization that allows all these knowledges to be controlled” (Foucault, 2003,179ff)

What this tells us is that in a certain time the concept of science becomes normative, that standards are set up that make it possible to distinguish between science and non-science. My assumption is that contradictions can be found between, on one hand the concept of science as something unified and normative, and on the other, the logic inherent in every scientific activity. For example, when the development of the hard natural sciences can be described in an incremental, progressive way, in spite of a cumulative scientific ideal, the history of, for example philosophy, can be regarded as just the history of one theory after another. I think that these differences between the natural and the human sciences are very much due to the differences in their object of research, and their special demands. As Habermas puts it, the specific of the cultural sciences is that the subject of knowledge refers to a field of objects that itself shares the structure of subjectivity (Habermas, 1988). When man himself serves as the object for study, escaping from the circle of hermeneutics seems impossible. As Ian Hacking notice, the study of man is the study of “moving targets”, sometimes shown by the difficulties for the human or social sciences to fulfil the empirical and objective standard.

Here I want to, briefly and highly simplified, by the case of history, demonstrate how an activity that, from its beginning mostly is to be regarded as cultural, by trying to fulfil a scientific standard becomes a scientific discipline, a standard based upon assumptions which in the end itself becomes criticized and put in question.

4 Two kinds of history

According to Iggers (Iggers, 1997), in the historiography of the twentieth century one can distinguish between three different historiographical types, that follow each other in a historic

sequence: “Classical Historicism” (Traditional Narrative History), “History under the Challenge of the Social Sciences” and “History under the Challenge of Postmodernism” (History after the “Linguistic Turn”). Within these three types one also can notice three different kinds of disciplinarity or disciplinary identities. E.g. three different types of activities, defined by different purposes which also demand different kinds of tools, following different set of rules, and are producing different sets of demarcation lines towards other activities. From a small example I will show how these different types of disciplinarity also demonstrate different forms of knowledge organization.

Here the “Classical Historicism” signifies institutionalized discipline with professional historians that emerges in the 19th century. By separating the imagined, invented, the propagandistic or superstitious from the “real thing”, one intended to transform history into a modern and positive scientific activity, based upon methodical controlled research. The instrument in this process was the invention and introduction of formalized criteria for source criticism, defined for example by Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), as basic tools for the historiographical craft.

Yet, one should not overlook the continuities with of older forms of historical writings. Traditional history, pre-scientific as well as scientific, both deal with collections of important events successively organized into coherent narrations. Although scientific history deals with empirically validated events, as for example Hayden White has pointed out, also scientific history necessarily needs imagination to put the events together into a coherent story, a coherence given by a certain theme, a certain focus, of an idea – many times only implicit – that history is the history *about* something (White, 1980). Thus, in the 16th or 17th centuries the craft of history was connected to the emergence of the absolute state. Here history, used as a powerful means of propaganda, was the history of the state and its dynastic successions. In the age of Illumination and its belief in a universal progress for humanity as a whole, instead the idea of “universal history” became fashionable. Now history becomes the history of the progress of humanity as a whole, and the national history, defined by curriculum and reproduced in universities and public schools, in this regard, becomes the history of how the nation becomes a part of this universal progress.

This traditional history type, dealing with politics, with wars, kings and constitutions is also the kind of history that still is the most common in scholarly textbooks and bibliographical classification schedules. A body of knowledge, organized basically in a two dimensional schedule, consisting of one temporal and one geographical axis. A temporal axis divided in periods, often related to political issues, and a geographical divided by different states.

Thus, neither the scientification, nor the professionalization of history, threatened the traditional political historiographical theme and its narrative form which remained the same. Yet, this kind of history, built upon the same principles as concepts like canon, “Bildung” etc. that have reached their power mostly by considering themselves as universal and eternal, has in our, post-modern, times been hardly accused of being merely expressions of certain interests of a certain class in a certain time and their struggle for legitimization. In this matter their nature most deeply seems to be ideological rather than ontological.

But some of the features of this kind of traditional historiography were challenged also earlier. Within the explosion of research and education in the post-war West, with students from new social groups at the universities, and a generally more left-oriented leaning, the traditional

historiographical focus upon the society upper classes, necessary, became challenged by a new history from below, by a new historiographical social science orientated approach towards the society as a whole.

This is also the second historiographical type that Iggers points out, called “The Challenge of the Social Sciences”. Here the Marxists historiography was crucial with its class perspective and explicit use of explanatory theories. Yet here I will exemplify this historiographic “Middle Phase”, not by a purely Marxist example, but by one from the Annales-circle and one of its leading figures, Fernand Braudel, and his famous *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. An enormous work (the English translation consists of thirteen hundred pages) of which the first French edition was published 1949. The ambition of this pioneer work was to combine the traditional and social science orientated forms of historical writing into a synthesis, to make a work where the scope of study not only was the society as a whole, but also to including its environmental conditions. This expanding historiographical scope is also a result of Annales as a milieu where researcher from economics, anthropology and geography comes together in interdisciplinary collaboration.

In order to make this synthesis, a merge of different historiographical scopes and levels possible, Braudel had to expand the traditional one-dimensional historiography into a three-level system. First, as the basis, a level dealing with “la longue durée”, a kind of “geo-history”, with the natural and geographically given background conditions for the society, and with the almost timeless history of the elements that shapes the conditions for human beings. A history, as Braudel puts it, whose “passage is almost imperceptible”, “in which all change is slow”, “of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles” (Braudel, 1976, p. 20).

Secondly, above this first level, Braudel puts another consisting of a social and economic history, a history about “les conjonctures”, the conjunctures. When conjuncture is here to be understood as a kind of structure (Braudel, 1976, p. 16), this second part introduces a structuralistic perspective. Here Braudel describes a history where one can observe, a still very slow but yet observable, movement. This is the history of “economic systems, states, societies, civilizations” attempts to show how all these, what Braudel calls “deep-seated forces” were at work in the “complex arena of warfare”, because, as Braudel states it, “war, as we know, is not an arena governed purely by individual responsibilities” (Braudel, 1976:20). Thus, this is the history of groups and groupings, about how these “swelling currents affect Mediterranean life in general” (Braudel, 1976, p. 19).

Above these two levels, the upper level of events, “l’histoire événementielle”. This is the history of events, something to be regarded as the traditional scope of historical writing, a kind of historiography that are modelled, not “after the human being, but after the measurements of the individual” (Braudel, 1976, p. 19).

In the over-all structure of the book, each one of its three parts is dedicated to one of these layers of time and, at the same time, to a set of certain historiographical objects. From “The role of the environment” and “Collective destinies and general trends” to “Events, politics and people”, one can follow a cognitive line from the environment through the conjunctures, to the events. An approach in which also statistical methods became a part, something, as Pierre Vilar put it out, made the “objectification of the subjective” which makes “materialistic history possible – the history of the masses” (Vilar, 1973, p. 79).

A way to regard a document, a book, is as a knowledge organizing system (KOS), as a system where the content is organized according to some special order, an order which in turn relates to a meta-understanding, just like any other KOS as thesaurus or classification schedules. By studying the table of content, with its function of being an index pointing out how the content is distributed throughout the sites, my assumption is that something also can be revealed about this meta-understanding. An interesting feature one notices when studying the table of content in *The Mediterranean*, is the fact that the three parts are organized in basically two different ways.

Thus, the two first parts, which deal with the very slow geo- and social history (which here will be called Braudel I&II) are organized in a *thematic*, rather than the traditional chronologic historiographical order. Headings could in the first part for instance be “Peninsulas: mountains, plateaus, and plains”, “The heart of the Mediterranean: seas and coasts” or “The Mediterranean as a physical unit: climate and history”. And in the second part for example: “Economies: the measure of the century”, “Empires”, “Societies”, “Civilizations” or “Forms of war”. The third part (Braudel III) is instead organized *chronologically*. Here we can find headings such as “1550-1559: War and Peace in Europe”, continuing with “The six last Years of Turkish Supremacy: 1559-1565” and finally ending up in the last chapter with “Out of the Limelight: The Mediterranean after 1580”. The traditional, chronological and narrative approach of the third part is obvious through the dates in the chapter titles: “1550-1559”; “1559-1565”; “1566-1570”; “1577-84” and “after 1580”. The gap between 1570 and 1577 is filled by the history of the battle of Lepanto and its consequences. A traditional conception of history as configured upon chronological sequence, with the timeline and its periodization as powerful cognitive tools, here are meeting thematic approach.

Also the scope differs: the traditional stress on the uniqueness of certain events meets the structuralistic search for likeness. When Braudel I&II are focusing upon, not only the society as a totality, but also its natural conditions, Braudel III instead deals with political events. Something that becomes visible through the different kinds of terminology used in the headings, e.g. different theoretical tool used of different activities with different goal: in the first case more general terms, in the second terms related to the unique events, e.g. a differences similar to the one between the forms of organising history vs. social science in traditional bibliographical classification systems.

5 Towards a unified field of human sciences?

Of importance is Braudel’s stress of the fact that these three levels, although each one can be regarded representing a certain temporality, together compose an integrated unit. According to the overall composition, regarded as a coherent narration, it is easy to interpret Braudel I&II as merely the background to the history of events.

In that matter, although some of the fundamental assumptions of the traditional narrative history were challenged by the social science oriented historiography, Iggers points out two important features that remained intact:

1. The correspondence theory of truth, that history deals with real subject matter.
2. The operation with a one-dimensional, diachronic, conception of time (Iggers, 1997, 3 f.).

The relation to the correspondence theory of truth is obvious. By relying upon quantitative approaches, rather modelled after the natural sciences than after the traditional hermeneutic approaches, the leaning upon methods from the social sciences was only radicalizing the empirical approach. Thus, the results of challenge from social sciences could be interpreted as a kind of counter-history, that signified another step towards a higher level of disciplinary scientification.

Yet, the synthetic approach and the over-all covering format of *The Mediterranean* didn't become the future historiographical standard, not even within the Annales-circle. Instead one can observe a kind of "historiographic fragmentation". Instead of being a background to the political events, the every day life becomes the main interest. In the Annales-circle one becomes more and more focusing also on popular belief systems (mentalités). This fragmentation of the historiographic object and the turn towards a microhistory, also signified a growing conviction of, to cite Lawrence Stone, "that a coherent scientific explanation of the past", e.g. the dealing with the past as one coherent unit, "no longer was possible" (Stone, 1979, p. 19). One example of establishing alternative historiographical view-points, is that the history from below now not only included women, but introduces a feminist perspective that challenges the traditional male dominated understanding of history.

Also, this shift signifies a shift of interest from demography and statistics of trade, to the aspects of cultural meaning, from the measurable to the merely interpretable. Regarded as an activity, this radical shift of historiographical focus from material structures and processes, towards a cultural history concerned with issues of identity or power reproduced by the language, signifies that not only the goal of the activity changes, but also some of its tools. Instead of macro-theories about the social, one became using linguistic theories.

Here we can see the third of Iggers historiographic categories; history after the "Linguistic Turn" or "history under the challenge of Postmodernism". One central element of the "turn", according to Iggers, "consists in the recognition of the importance of language of discourse in the constitution of societies" (Iggers, 1997, p. 123). That means, when meaning is embedded and communicated through the language, also cultures are to be regarded as texts, as an anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz would maintain.

This idea about language as a self-contained system had been foreshadowed by Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* published in 1916. Developing these ideas further, theorists such as Jacques Derrida or Michal Foucault, continued and radicalized the stress on the non-referential aspects of language, urging that language *constructs* reality rather than referring to it. If one no longer can talk about a clear-cut object of history outside the text, it's also difficult to maintain history as a strictly empirical enterprise. Instead, when the social becomes regarded as text, also history itself becomes a form among others of constructing reality by the means of rhetorical tools. A maybe paradoxical result of this is that also historiography itself becomes regarded as an artefact among others, and in this matter becomes a possible object for critical analysis, also by its own discipline. This shift from a scientific focusing on empirical objects, to a focusing on texts, upon language itself and its capability of constructing reality, by for example directing criticism against the ideological presuppositions hidden in the text, means that the very idea of objectivity is challenged, and in this matter, some of the basic assumptions of scientific history.

And, by shifting goals and tools of the activity, also the disciplinary demarcation lines become challenged. Traditionally defined by its empiric research objects, these lines now become more and more difficult to maintain. “Barriers between disciplines are falling while perhaps new barriers within the disciplines are being built” as the art librarian Lyn Kornic observes (Korenic, 1997, p. 13). The same phenomenon as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz points out when he claims that “the lines grouping scholars together into intellectual communities, or (what is the same thing) sorting them out into different ones, are these days running as some highly eccentric circles” (Geertz, 1983, p. 23-24). Something that also could be underlined by the observation from Immanuel Wallerstein and the “Gulbenkian commission” on the difficulties to decide in which discipline a certain paper was written, whether it was done by a political scientist, a sociologist, a historical or by an economist (Gulbenkian Commission, 1996).

It has also been empirically shown, by a bibliometrical study over review-patterns, that “the boundaries between the disciplines, especially in the social sciences and humanities, may be more permeable than what previously has been thought”, and that “there is much more cross-disciplinary communication among the humanities and social science disciplines than would have been expected based on the literature and on the so-called conventional wisdom” (Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998). In study of literature referred in Swedish dissertation in history I could notice maybe the same phenomenon; a great part (44%) came from fields outside history, e.g. from books classified by librarians as non-history books (Nyström 2001).

Another empirical sign in direction towards this kind of scientific unification is the fact that, according to a search on the different subject categories in Social Science Citation Index and in Arts and Humanities Citation index, year 2005, a theorist as Michael Foucault, with his interest in linguistic and discursively constructive formations of power, was the most cited author in history, literature, general human science, and anthropology, and the second most cited in the category social science. Etc., etc.

6 Conclusion

The three historiographical types, briefly presented above, also represent three different activity types, representing three of disciplinarity, with different forms of KO and different disciplinary borders:

First, the *disciplinary phase*: By the transformation of a partly pre-scientific activity to fulfil demands given by a scientific standard, history becomes a scientific discipline, but without changing, neither its traditional scope on the state, politics, kings, governments and war, nor its traditional narrative form or its hermeneutic methods. The idea of history as the story of a coherent past also reflects in a chronological organization.

Second: Without giving up its basic disciplinary assumptions, but by adopting methods and theories from the social sciences as statistics, history enters an *inter-disciplinary phase*. Here also a tendency towards organizational principles that is thematic, rather than chronologic.

Third: By the challenges from The Linguistic Turn and the shift from an empirical scrutinizing of different objects of research, towards a focusing upon the linguistic, that also affected other disciplines in the field of humanities and social sciences, one can talk about a

kind of *post-disciplinary phase*. A phase where traditional disciplinary boundaries are challenged.

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