ADVANCES IN KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION
Proceedings of International ISKO Conference - ISSN: 0938-5495 - 2026 - São Paulo

Archival Terminology as a Knowledge Organization System

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Abstract

This article argues that archival terminology should be treated not merely as a lexical repertoire, but as a knowledge organization system (KOS) that supports conceptual control, semantic mediation, representation, and retrieval in Archival Science. On that basis, it proposes a methodology for developing a dictionary of archival terminology from a specialized corpus composed of theoretical texts, historical studies on archival dictionaries, multilingual glossaries, and case analyses of specific archival terms. The argument is grounded in a qualitative documentary and terminological analysis of works that discuss standardization, concept formation, vocabulary control, multilingual equivalence, and the historical constitution of Brazilian archival terminology. The paper defends that a dictionary of archival terminology must be corpus-based, concept-oriented, domain-warranted, sensitive to cultural and linguistic variation, and explicitly modeled through equivalence, hierarchical, and associative relations. It therefore presents a staged procedure that includes: corpus delimitation, term extraction, conceptual decomposition, analysis of variation and ambiguity, relation modeling, definition writing, expert validation, and continuous updating. The result is not a merely prescriptive glossary, but a dynamic terminological KOS capable of documenting consensus, registering conflict, and supporting archival description, translation, teaching, and information retrieval.

Keywords: archival terminology; knowledge organization systems; archival dictionary; terminology methodology; archival science.

1.0 Introduction

Archival terminology occupies a central place in the epistemic constitution of Archival Science because the field does not operate only through practices, procedures, and institutions; it also depends on a stable, discussable, and transmissible conceptual language. The archival field names documentary entities, functions, principles, operations, instruments, and relations, and each designation carries theoretical implications. A dictionary of archival terminology is therefore not an accessory aid to writing. It is one of the

places where the field defines its own conceptual boundaries, negotiates meanings, and organizes access to its specialized knowledge.

This article starts from the premise that archival terminology should be approached as a knowledge organization system, and that formulation is particularly productive for Archival Science because it positions terminology as a mediating infrastructure. Terminological work is not merely lexical. It organizes concepts for specialized communication, stabilizes professional understanding, and makes domain knowledge reusable across description, classification, appraisal, preservation, teaching, and research.

The need for such an organization becomes more visible whenever archival language reveals instability. Dryden (2004, 147) identifies the "fuzziness of our professional language" and shows that even long-standing archival terms may circulate with divergent meanings. The problem, therefore, is not limited to neologisms or digital terminology. It concerns basic archival concepts and the degree to which a profession can sustain shared understanding while preserving sensitivity to local and historical contexts. The classical metaphor of a "Tower of Babel" in archival terminology (Dryden 2005) remains apt because the archival field repeatedly confronts the tension between standardization and contextual specificity.

Against this background, the aim of this article is twofold. First, it argues that archival terminology functions as a KOS because it performs conceptual, relational, normative, and retrieval-oriented functions. Second, it proposes a methodological pathway for developing a dictionary of archival terminology from a specialized corpus of texts on Archival Science. The intention is not to produce a closed list of terms, but to establish a robust methodological framework through which such a dictionary can be built, validated, and updated.

2.0 Archival terminology and the KOS perspective

To treat archival terminology as a KOS is to move beyond the idea that a dictionary is simply a repository of definitions. In knowledge organization, a KOS structures concepts, regulates equivalences, expresses semantic relations, and supports representation and retrieval. When archival terminology is examined from this perspective, it becomes clear that archival dictionaries, glossaries, and terminological databases already perform KOS functions: they identify preferred designations, register variants, delimit concepts, and relate terms to other concepts in a structured domain.

This argument is strengthened by concept theory. Dahlberg (1978, 9) states that "each predicate provides a characteristic (element)" and this insight is decisive for terminological work. A term is not reducible to a word-form; it is tied to a concept analytically composed of characteristics, relations, and categorical placement. If each concept must be described through its defining characteristics, then a dictionary of archival terminology cannot limit itself to surface lexical correspondence. It must articulate the conceptual structure behind the term, which is precisely what a KOS does.

Archival terminology also becomes a KOS because of its normative function within documentary processes. Aguiar and Talámo (2012, 117) describe vocabulary control as a normative resource for naming activities, functional procedures, documentary types, and producing bodies. In archival environments, this type of control affects not only specialized discourse but also the consistency of description, the intelligibility of finding aids, the design of documentary systems, and the quality of information retrieval. Moreira et al. (2023, 102) reinforce this view when they argue that the use of terminology is indispensable to "organize and represent information" for retrieval.

From this perspective, an archival dictionary should be conceived as a conceptual device with at least five interrelated functions: (a) to stabilize preferred forms of denomination; (b) to register variants, synonyms, quasi-synonyms, and contested uses; (c) to write conceptually adequate definitions; (d) to model hierarchical, associative, and equivalence relations among terms; and (e) to support archival representation and multilingual mediation. A terminological dictionary, when built in this way, is not external to archival knowledge organization; it is one of its most explicit documentary embodiments.

Multilingual and collaborative archival experiences confirm this understanding. Rocha (2011, 76) observes, in the context of the InterPARES glossary, that terms and definitions are "essential to facilitating communication" among researchers and to support the dissemination of theory and methodology. The point is crucial: terminology is not only a description of a field; it is one of the mechanisms through which a field becomes communicable and operational.

3.0 Why a dictionary methodology cannot be merely prescriptive

A methodology for building an archival dictionary cannot assume that the field already possesses a single, coherent, and universally accepted conceptual inventory. Several studies in the corpus show precisely the opposite. Dryden (2005, 1-16) demonstrates that calls for standardization are recurrent, yet the obstacles are substantial because archival terms are historically shaped, linguistically unstable, and deeply influenced by national practice. In the same article, the appeal to "contextual terminology" and to "living language" is particularly important, since it suggests that standardization cannot ignore actual use and cultural warrant.

Brazilian archival literature reaches similar conclusions through the analysis of specific terms and dictionaries. Rangel and Mello e Silva (2021, 1) affirm that terminology is fundamental to scientific communication and that examining how concepts are expressed in dictionaries offers a view of the field's own development. However, the same study concludes that some principles and characteristics of archival documents are not named uniformly, indicating that conceptual consensus is partial rather than complete. Hernandez and Medeiros (2016, 16-33), in turn, show that the terms classification and arrangement exhibit more convergence than divergence in Brazilian literature, but only after a careful decomposition of their definitions into elements such as process, actions, principles, and documentary-cycle implications.

Other studies make the same methodological lesson even more explicit. Macedo (2018, 388-409) examines the term provenance in Portuguese archival terminography and identifies limited reuse of terms and definitions within intralinguistic contexts. Tognoli et al. (2016, 137) note that provenance occupies a "nuclear position" in Archival Science, but assumes different configurations depending on the cultural and linguistic environment. Holanda et al. (2022) add that international instruments, although important, are not sufficient for terminological transfer when concepts have been shaped by specific problems and contexts of origin. These findings make it impossible to sustain a purely prescriptive model of dictionary construction.

What follows from these studies is a methodological requirement: an archival dictionary must document not only preferred usage, but also conceptual instability, diachronic variation, multilingual asymmetry, and domain-specific contextualization. The objective is not to eliminate variation by fiat. Rather, it is to organize variation analytically, so that the dictionary records where consensus exists, where conflict remains, what relations connect the variants, and under which archival, linguistic, or documentary circumstances one use becomes more adequate than another.

4.0 Corpus and methodological assumptions

The methodological proposal developed here is grounded in a specialized corpus of archival terminology studies published between 1978 and 2023. This corpus includes theoretical discussions on terminology and classification (Bellotto 2007; Dahlberg 1978; Dryden 2004; Dryden 2005), studies on vocabulary control and documentary language in archival settings (Aguiar and Talámo 2012; Moreira et al. 2023), historical analyses of archival dictionaries (Barros and Schmidt 2021), multilingual glossaries and translation problems (Rocha 2011; Tognoli et al. 2016; Holanda et al. 2022), and term-centered investigations dedicated to principles, documentary characteristics, provenance, classification, arrangement, and records survey terminology (Hernandez and Medeiros 2016; Almeida et al. 2020; Macedo 2018; Rangel and Mello e Silva 2021; Carlini and Barbiero 2023).

Taken together, these texts suggest five methodological assumptions. First, dictionary construction must be corpus-based rather than intuition-based. Terms, variants, and definitions need to be collected from actual specialized discourse. Second, the work must be concept-oriented. The central unit is the concept expressed by the term, not the lexical form alone. Third, the methodology must be domain-warranted: terms are selected and validated for their relevance to archival discourse and practice, not simply for their general-language frequency. Fourth, the method must be relation-sensitive, since the semantic identity of an archival term depends on its links to broader, narrower, equivalent, and associated concepts. Fifth, the method must be context-aware, especially in multilingual and comparative work, because national traditions and documentary regimes shape the meaning of terminology.

The corpus also indicates that a productive methodology should combine semasiological and onomasiological movements. Macedo (2018) adopts a semasiological approach by tracking occurrences of the term provenance in diachronic terminographic corpora and analyzing similarities and differences in definitions. Onomasiological reasoning is equally necessary, however, when the work begins from a concept or functional problem and then seeks the appropriate term or the set of competing terms that designate it. A dictionary of archival terminology benefits from both movements: one starts from forms found in discourse, while the other reconstructs the conceptual field to which those forms belong.

5.0 Proposed stages for developing a dictionary of archival terminology

The studies in the corpus enable the derivation of a staged methodology for dictionary construction. The process below is designed for a terminological dictionary conceived as a KOS rather than as a mere alphabetical list of definitions (Table 1).

Table 1 Methodological Stages for an Archival Terminology Dictionary

Stage	Main operations	Methodological basis in the corpus	Output
1. Corpus delimitation	Define the documentary universe; select theoretical, historical, multilingual, and term-specific studies; register bibliographic metadata and text type.	Barros and Schmidt (2021) on dictionary history; Rocha (2011) on glossary/dictionary environments; Moreira et al. (2023) on broad bibliographic mapping.	A validated specialized corpus and selection protocol.
2. Extraction of candidate terms	Identify candidate terms, variants, definitional segments, and recurring collocations in titles, abstracts, glossaries, standards, and core discussions.	Macedo's (2018) corpus-based prospection; Hernandez and Medeiros (2016) on definitional elements; term-centered archival studies.	A preliminary term list with source contexts.

Stage	Main operations	Methodological basis in the corpus	Output
3. Terminological record creation	Create a record for each candidate term containing source, context, provisional definition, variants, language, and notes.	The use of index cards in comparative studies of archival terminology; Bellotto (2007) on collection and definition stages.	A structured record set for analysis and comparison.
4. Conceptual decompositio n	Identify genus, delimiting characteristics, function, documentary scope, and context of use; distinguish concept from word-form.	Dahlberg's (1978) concept theory; Bellotto (2007) on qualities of definition.	Concept profiles and analytically decomposed definitions.
5. Analysis of variation and ambiguity	Map polysemy, synonymy, quasi-synonymy, diachronic shifts, multilingual non-equivalence, and local usage.	Dryden (2004, 2005) on fuzziness and contextual terminology; Macedo (2018) on provenance; Rangel and Mello e Silva (2021) and Hernandez and Medeiros (2016) on definitional divergences.	A semantic map of consensus, variation, and conflict.
6. KOS relation modeling	Establish preferred/non-preferred forms, broader/narrower terms, related terms, scope notes, and	Aguiar and Talámo (2012) on vocabulary control; Tognoli et al. (2016) on multilingual archival terminology; Moreira et al. (2023) on	A terminological network suitable for a dictionary and database implementation.

Stage	Main operations	Methodological basis in the corpus	Output
	multilingual equivalents.	representation and retrieval.	
7. Definition writing and normalization	Write intensional definitions; add explanatory notes, usage constraints, documentary examples, and references; normalize editorial form.	Bellotto (2007) on definition writing; Almeida et al. (2020) on terminological standardization; corpus evidence from term analyses.	Editorially standardized dictionary entries.
8. Validation and updating	Submit entries to archivists and terminologists; test the dictionary in retrieval, teaching, and translation scenarios; version the resource over time.	Bellotto (2007) on dialogue between theorists and practitioners; Barros and Schmidt (2021) on the need for constant updating; Dryden (2005) on living language.	A reviewed, versioned, and maintainable archival terminology KOS.

The sequence should not be read as strictly linear. Dictionary construction is recursive. Conceptual decomposition often forces a return to corpus delimitation; multilingual comparison can reopen the analysis of variants; expert validation may require the creation of new relations or explanatory notes. Nonetheless, the eight stages provide a stable methodological architecture.

6.0 Definitional writing and the microstructure of entries

One of the most delicate stages in terminological work is the writing of definitions. A dictionary of archival terminology should privilege intensional definitions, that is, definitions that state the concept by identifying its genus and delimiting characteristics, while also making room for functional and contextual notes when necessary. Bellotto (2007, 47) highlights the importance of the phases of gathering and definition of terms, and Dahlberg (1978, 9) provides the conceptual basis for this work by linking concepts to

analytically identifiable characteristics. This implies that definitions should not merely restate usage or provide circular paraphrases.

At the same time, archival terminology cannot always be reduced to a single minimal formula. Some concepts are stable enough for concise definition; others require explanatory notes because their use varies across countries, documentary traditions, or institutional practices. The case studies in the corpus make this clear: provenance, classification, arrangement, records survey terminology, and documentary characteristics all reveal degrees of instability or semantic overlap. Therefore, dictionary entries should be layered rather than flat.

From a KOS perspective, the recommended microstructure of an entry includes the following fields (Table 2).

Table 2 Entry Microstructure for an Archival Terminology Dictionary

Field	**Function in the dictionary/KOS**
Preferred term	Authorized form recommended for indexing, teaching, and specialized use.
Non-preferred terms / variants	Spelling variants, historical forms, competing designations, and cross-references.
Grammatical and documentary category	Part of speech plus indication of whether the concept refers to a principle, process, documentary type, instrument, actor, or relation.
Definition	Intensional definition written from concept analysis, with domain warrant.
Scope note	Clarifies limits of application, institutional context, or national specificity.
Broader, narrower, and related terms	Represents hierarchical and associative relations required by a KOS.
Equivalents in other languages	Registers multilingual correspondence together with notes on partial or problematic equivalence.
Documentary/example context	Provides a concise example of professional use or documentary environment.

Field	Function in the dictionary/KOS
Source and authority note	Indicates the texts, dictionaries, standards, or studies that support the entry.
Status and revision history	Marks the entry as validated, provisional, contested, or updated, with version control.

This microstructure allows the dictionary to accommodate both stability and conflict. A term may have an authorized form and, simultaneously, a note documenting unresolved debate or restricted usage. This is especially important in Archival Science, where multilingual transfer and historical sedimentation frequently produce asymmetries that must be made visible rather than erased.

7.0 Direct implications for archival terminology work

The methodology proposed here has direct implications for how archival terminology projects should be organized institutionally. First, the work should be collaborative. Bellotto (2007, 47) insists on the need for dialogue between theorists and practitioners, and Barros and Schmidt (2021, 195) show that Brazilian archival dictionaries emerged from committees, commissions, and collective efforts rather than from isolated authorship. If terminology is both conceptual and operational, it cannot be validated only in the abstract.

Second, the methodology should formally include expertise in terminology. Dryden (2005, 15) explicitly argues that archivists could benefit from the methods of terminologists, whose work involves term identification, contextual analysis, term creation, and standardization. This recommendation remains pertinent because archival projects often possess strong domain knowledge but insufficient methodological formalization in concept analysis, equivalence management, and definitional writing.

Third, the dictionary should be tested in real use environments. Because archival terminology supports description, indexing, retrieval, translation, and teaching, validation must include applied scenarios: finding-aid construction, terminological translation, student glossary consultation, and controlled-vocabulary implementation in archival systems. A dictionary that is conceptually elegant but unusable in archival workflows falls short of the KOS perspective defended here.

Fourth, the resource must be explicitly versioned. Barros and Schmidt (2021, 195) note that the principal Brazilian dictionaries were fundamental to the structuring of the field, but require constant updating. The point is reinforced by studies on digital records and multilingual transfer, where emerging terms, borrowed concepts, and new documentary environments quickly expose the obsolescence of static terminological tools. A

contemporary archival dictionary must therefore be iterative, revisable, and transparent about change.

8.0 Final considerations

Archival terminology is best understood not as a passive vocabulary but as an active system of knowledge organization. It structures professional communication, stabilizes concepts, supports representation and retrieval, and documents the epistemic history of the archival field. For that reason, a dictionary of archival terminology should be conceived as a KOS: a relational, concept-oriented, and revisable resource rather than a merely alphabetical list of definitions.

The corpus examined here demonstrates that archival terms are simultaneously necessary and unstable. The field depends on conceptual control, yet its central notions are often marked by polysemy, diachronic sedimentation, multilingual asymmetry, and contextual variation. This is why a rigorous dictionary methodology must be corpus-based, analytic, and dialogical. It must extract terms from actual specialized discourse, decompose concepts into defining characteristics, map semantic relations, register conflict, and validate entries in professional use.

The methodological pathway proposed in this article responds to that challenge. It combines documentary analysis, concept theory, vocabulary control, multilingual awareness, and archival domain warrant. In doing so, it offers a way to construct an archival dictionary that does not suppress complexity, but organizes it. That is precisely the contribution expected from a KOS in Archival Science.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence: We, Roberta Pinto Medeiros, Wesley Domingues Sena, and Renata Ribeiro da Silva, authors of the paper *Archival Terminology as a Knowledge Organization System*, hereby declare, for the purposes of transparency and academic integrity, that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used during the preparation of this work. The tool used was ChatGPT, between January and March 2026, exclusively as a support resource for linguistic and textual revision**,** reference formatting and checking, and technical translation into English. The use of the tool involved prompts aimed at grammatical correction, improvement of textual cohesion and coherence, and translation of passages into English, including requests such as: “correct the sentence to make it coherent and cohesive” and “translate the text into English.” Artificial Intelligence was not used for the autonomous production, interpretation, or analysis of data, nor for the formulation of the research results and conclusions. All content processed with the assistance of the AI tool was subjected to critical review, verification, and human validation by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the content and the final version of the work.

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