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Diplomatics and Indexing: initial approaches to archival knowledge organization

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Abstract

This study in Archival Knowledge Organization examines the theoretical and practical foundations of Diplomatics and its relationship with the indexing of archival records, particularly at the stage of conceptual analysis. It demonstrates how this approximation between knowledge domains contributes to a more precise analysis and representation of archival records, broadening the understanding of their subject, which cannot be reduced to their explicit thematic content. Based on theoretical references, the study argues that the diplomatic method can be productively combined with conceptual analysis in indexing. As a result, it proposes using four dimensions of the diplomatic method, together with selected indexing principles, to define the content of records with respect to their subject.

1.0 Introduction

Knowledge Organization has consolidated itself in recent decades as a theoretical–conceptual framework within Information Science, aimed at understanding the processes of representation, mediation, and access to information in different institutional contexts. As evidenced in debates promoted within the International Society for Knowledge Organization (ISKO), there has been an ongoing movement of reflection on the conceptual, epistemological, and applied foundations of the field, particularly in light of contemporary technological transformations.

In the archival field, such discussions take on specific contours, since archival records are characterized by their organic relationship to the functions, activities, and structures of their creators. In this sense, the organization and representation of knowledge in archives cannot be understood through universalizing models derived predominantly from Library Science; rather, they must be grounded in the principles and methods specific to Archival Science, such as the principle of provenance and the context of creation, as well as in the conceptual foundations and expanded practices that inform the understanding of the indexing process within the domain of Information Science. Such an approach contributes to overcoming representational practices centered exclusively on decontextualized

thematic content, thereby fostering a broader understanding of the functional, legal, and social dimensions of records.

However, within the scope of indexing, methodological weaknesses in conceptual analysis and documentary representation still persist, particularly in the systematic identification of the semantic and contextual elements of archival records. In many cases, indexing processes in archives remain dependent on the subjective interpretations of indexers and on models and guidelines that are insufficiently sensitive to the specificities of these records.

In this context, it becomes necessary to deepen reflection on theoretical and methodological instruments capable of grounding indexing practices in archives from the perspective of archival discourse. Diplomatics, a discipline whose object is the study of the documentary form for the purpose of verifying authenticity, emerges as a potentially relevant contribution to this debate, as it enables the systematic identification of the constitutive elements of records—such as creator, documentary form and record type, activity, dates, and normative context.

In light of this, the present article aims to discuss the theoretical and practical foundations of Diplomatics and its dialogue with the indexing process in archives, particularly its stage of conceptual analysis, demonstrating how the diplomatic method contributes to a more precise organization and representation of archival knowledge.

2.0 Archival Knowledge Organization: conceptual foundations and theoretical approaches

The consolidation of Knowledge Organization (KO) as a theoretical framework within Information Science has facilitated the incorporation of domains historically marginalized within the field, among them Archival Science. As highlighted by Silva and Tognoli (2022), KO constitutes a qualified space for the construction of theoretical and methodological frameworks aimed at the organization and representation of socially produced knowledge. Until the mid-1980s, however, this approximation remained strongly associated with librarianship practices.

This scenario begins to change when archives come to be understood as information systems and when it is recognized that archival classification and description processes also constitute forms of knowledge organization (Silva and Tognoli 2022). In this context, a discursive community emerges that articulates classical archival principles—such as provenance and original order—with epistemological approaches from Knowledge Organization.

It is within this framework that Tognoli et al. (2013) introduce the notion of archival knowledge, defined as the knowledge produced by a person or entity and organized into fonds. This perspective shifts the focus from documentary organization to the understanding of knowledge produced organically, bringing Archival Science closer to the conception of knowledge organization proposed by Hjørland (2008). In the same work, the authors highlight Diplomatics as a methodological foundation for the analysis of

documentary form, genesis, and juridical act, thereby contributing to the understanding of the structure of archival knowledge.

This notion is further developed by Tognoli et al. (2019), who, grounded in Dahlberg's theory of the concept, define archival knowledge through three dimensions: the fonds, the documentary form, and the context of creation. This triad demonstrates that knowledge organization in archives is not limited to thematic content but results from the articulation between provenance, form, and function.

In this way, Archival Knowledge Organization is configured as a specific domain within Knowledge Organization, characterized by the integration of archival principles and contemporary epistemological approaches. While incorporating instruments from Knowledge Organization, Archival Science also contributes to its expansion by emphasizing the organic, functional, and contextual dimensions of representation.

Within this framework, Diplomatics assumes a structuring role by providing the foundations for understanding documentary form, the juridical act, and institutional functions, thereby guiding the identification of the elements that constitute archival knowledge and contributing to the processes of indexing and representation.

3.0 Indexing of Archival Records

As mentioned above, this article proposes to examine the theoretical and empirical feasibility of establishing a dialogue between the method of diplomatic analysis and conceptual analysis in the indexing process. The consolidation of the term and of the theoretical–methodological current of indexing was strengthened through the contributions of the Classification Research Group (CRG) in the 1950s and 1960s. According to La Barre (2010, 256), this phase constituted "a period of intense activity in early information retrieval experimentation with design and testing of faceted classification schemes or the use of facet analysis to create indexing systems."

From this perspective, indexing is not limited to a technical operation of assigning uncontrolled terms (keywords) to a document without defined criteria; rather, it constitutes an intellectual activity that involves interpretation, selection, and conceptual synthesis. The representation resulting from this process aims to ensure the effective retrieval of records, thereby facilitating access to and use of information.

It is important to note that the principles and techniques of indexing historically consolidated in response to the need to organize and make retrievable large volumes of documents, particularly with the expansion of scientific and documentary production driven by the development of systems for the mechanical retrieval of information (Kent 1962) and emerging technologies. In this context, indexing is situated within the domain of Knowledge Organization as one of its central procedures, playing a strategic role in the structuring of information systems and environments and in ensuring access to records of knowledge.

It is worth highlighting a historical aspect related to the work of the CRG, whose members developed theories in the field of knowledge organization and representation and applied them to collections of different natures, particularly specialized documentation. In this context, principles and practices were strongly influenced by Ranganathan's faceted theory, as well as by the emergence of databases, considering at the time the pressure exerted by publishers for the organization of the so-called indexing and abstracting services.

Although its members frequently worked independently in their bibliographic productions ("Bibliography of Writings by members of the CRG" 1973), they stood out as important commentators and proposers of theoretical developments, often expanding and deepening Ranganathan's ideas—for example, facet analysis, citation order, the articulation between categories, and the expanded structuring of vocabularies—aimed at achieving a more consistent, expanded, and diversified organization and representation of documentary content. Although the CRG was dissolved at the end of the 1960s, its ideas continued to influence researchers, helping to stimulate the development of a theoretical–methodological current within the field of Knowledge Organization, within which indexing studies are situated.

Considering that this body of knowledge has provided consistent methodological foundations for knowledge organization projects, the use of categories as a criterion for conducting the conceptual analysis of documents in the indexing process stands out. Such analysis, carried out through categories, allows the content and context of documents to be explored from multiple perspectives. According to McIlwaine (2003, 205), when addressing the relationship between indexing and the contributions of the CRG, she notes that "an understanding of categorization and the need to think clearly and consistently seem obvious fundamental requirements for the indexer [...]". In the same article, the author recalls the early stages of the use of computers for information retrieval and the application of indexing methods: "in the days when computers were in an embryonic form, indexing methods that were later to be employed by computer scientists in devising programs for retrieval" (McIlwaine 2003, 206).

In light of this, within this interpretative framework, the importance and feasibility of using categories for the conceptual analysis of documents in indexing are emphasized, drawing on the diplomatic method. In this context, it is relevant to mention the early recommendations of UNISIST (1975, 5) regarding indexing principles, particularly with regard to the identification of concepts in documents, that is, "the choice of concepts can be related to a scheme of categories recognised as important in the field covered by the document."

From this perspective, the field concerned will be made explicit through diplomatic analysis, and the concepts will emerge from the following dimensions—name (documentary form and record type), documentary category (purpose), internal elements (subject, date, and text), and the persons involved in the records creation process (author of the action and author of the document). These dimensions will be taken as analytical categories for determining the subject of the record in its various aspects. All these criteria

and decisions should be documented and made explicit in the archive's indexing policy, ensuring clarity and consistency in the indexing process.

According to Vickery (1960), conceptual analysis can be understood as a form of faceted analysis insofar as it identifies concepts through the observation of different categories commonly employed within a given domain, using them as the raw material for the analytical process of indexing. In a subsequent stage of indexing, the representation of each of these analyzed dimensions is translated into controlled terms. However, as previously mentioned, this second stage of indexing will not be addressed in this study.

4.0 Diplomatics and the diplomatic method: elements for textual criticism

Diplomatics emerged in the seventeenth century with the aim of verifying the authenticity of medieval charters, in a context marked by recurrent forgeries, particularly within ecclesiastical institutions. Its emergence is related to the need to establish systematic criteria for distinguishing authentic documents from false ones, thereby ensuring legal certainty in patrimonial relations.

Over time, diplomatic criticism was refined and systematized, expanding its analytical scope. In the nineteenth century, emphasis was consolidated on the relationship between documentary form and the juridical act, as well as on the analysis of the genesis of the record. In this process, categories such as protocol, text, and eschatocol were established, lending greater scientific rigor to the discipline. As Bellotto (2002) notes, Diplomatics came to focus on the genesis, internal constitution, transmission, and relationships between the record, its creator, and its content.

In the twentieth century, this methodological refinement was further developed by contemporary diplomatics, which articulates form, function, procedure, and institutional context, understanding the record as the result of regulated administrative processes (Duranti 1998). From this perspective, the diplomatic method is no longer limited to the verification of authenticity but assumes an interpretative function, aimed at understanding the relationships between documentary form, record type, and administrative context.

Tognoli (2014) systematizes this method (Table 1) based on the analysis of internal, external, and intermediate elements, configuring a model capable of responding to the demands of contemporary archival records, particularly in the digital environment. This theoretical–methodological maturation has enabled the incorporation of Diplomatics into archival studies as a fundamental tool for processes of identification, classification, and description, opening the way for its application in knowledge organization and representation, particularly in indexing.

Table 1 Diplomatic method

Dimension	**Elements of Analysis**
Document name	Documentary form; Record type

Dimension	Elements of Analysis
Documentary Category	Dispositive; Probative; Informative
Nature of the Act	Public; Private
External Elements	Material; Type of writing; Print quality (visualization; document integrity); Recording medium; Seals and signs
Internal Elements	Language; Style of language; Protocol (title; subject; dates; invocation; titulature – name and predicate of the author and the addressee; opening salutation); Text (preamble; exposition; notification; dispositive clause; sanction; corroboration; announcement of validation marks); Eschatocol (precaution; closing salutation; dates; subscription)
Persons involved in the creation of the record	Author of the action; Author of the document; Addressee of the action; Addressee of the document; Writer; Witnesses involved
State of Transmission	Pre-original; Original; Post-original
Complementary Information	Fonds; Group; Series; Notation

The diplomatic method provides a structured set of dimensions that translate into categories capable of consistently supporting the indexing process in archives. By making explicit the constitutive elements of the document in their formal, functional, and contextual aspects, diplomatic analysis offers fundamental inputs for the identification, selection, and normalization of representative terms—not only of the document's content but, above all, of its context.

In the following section, we present the correspondence between the dimensions of diplomatic analysis and their respective functions in the indexing process.

5.0 Indexing and Diplomatics: initial approaches

In the conceptual analysis of an archival record, concepts of different natures are examined, extracted from the record itself, with the purpose of representing it in its multiple aspects. The assignment of terms to these concepts constitutes access points intended to enable their retrieval. However, the identification and representation of these different aspects require the adoption of consistent and stable criteria by the indexer, in order to ensure the proper contextualization of the content and the coherence of the analytical

process. It should be emphasized that such criteria must be integrated into a formal indexing policy of the archive, thereby ensuring uniformity, transparency, and continuity in the practices adopted.

In this sense, the approximation between indexing and Diplomatics, as previously discussed, enables the grounded use of the categories of the diplomatic method as a methodological resource for examining records from four perspectives identified in Section Three of this paper, understood as dimensions of application. These dimensions are presented below in dialogue with indexing principles and with selected categories proposed by the CRG (Broughton 2006).

a) Document name (Documentary form and record type)

In the archival context, the name of the document corresponds to the configuration assumed by the documentary form according to the action it records. This formal configuration is adopted by the document as a result of its function and of juridical or administrative tradition. When the activity that gave rise to it is added to the documentary form, the so-called record type emerges, which is necessary for recognizing the nature of the document and situating it within the set of institutional practices that produced it. The record type is therefore the name attributed to the document.

In this dimension, two aspects are identified that must be analyzed and declared in indexing, in accordance with the diplomatic method. The first is the documentary form, which in indexing principles corresponds to the “form of the document.” Traditionally, in the bibliographic domain, this form is presented under three main categories: physical forms, presentation forms, and intellectual forms. In this study, the analysis focuses on the physical form of the document, such as a memorandum, minutes, or certificate, among others. This characteristic may be related to the CRG category known as Kind. The remaining forms will be the subject of analysis and discussion in future studies within the scope of archival records.

Concerning the record type, in the diplomatic method, it expresses the action recorded. In the context of indexing, this dimension corresponds to the category Operation, understood as the deliberate action that underlies and motivates the recording of the documentary act. It therefore refers to the purpose that materializes in the documentary form. As an example, one may cite a request for an extension of a deadline, in which the specific administrative action is formally expressed in the document. This category requires further analytical refinement and more systematic conceptual discussion to be developed in future studies within this domain of knowledge.

b) Documentary Category (Purpose)

This dimension refers to the legal value of the content of documents, that is, to the juridical–functional nature of the act recorded by the document.

Purpose is also related, within the framework of indexing principles, to the category Operation, as it indicates the objective or intended outcome of the documented administrative action. Within the framework of CRG categories, Operation represents deliberate actions or interventions carried out by agents upon something. From this perspective, purpose may be understood as an analytical unfolding of this category, since it expresses the intention that guides the action recorded in the document within the context of administrative activity.

c) Internal Elements (Content)

These comprise the intrinsic components of the document, such as subject, dates, and text. In the diplomatic method, these elements are part of the internal structure of the document and are examined both in their form and in their content, contributing to the identification of its authenticity, function, and context of creation.

In the indexing process, this stage corresponds to the declaration of the subject explicitly present in the document, which consists of identifying the concepts (ideas) contained in its content. It is therefore necessary to determine which concepts are present, which may refer to persons, institutions, functions, activities, disciplines, or other topics. In addition, the categories Place and Time should be incorporated, situating the document in its contextual aspects by indicating the spatial location and the temporal reference of the phenomenon or entity to which the subject refers, thereby reinforcing the precision of indexing.

Example: for a document with the subject “Maintenance works carried out in the municipal public schools of the city of Rio de Janeiro, fiscal year 2026,” the following indexing subjects can be identified: Maintenance works; Municipal public schools; Rio de Janeiro (city); 2026.

d) Persons Involved in the Creation of the Document

This dimension encompasses the individuals who participate in the documentary act. According to diplomatic tradition, a distinction is made between the author of the action (the person responsible for the act recorded by the document) and the author of the document (the person responsible for its material preparation or drafting), as well as the addressee of the action, the addressee of the document, and the writer. In some cases, these roles may coincide (for example, the addressee of the action and the addressee of the document); however, this distinction is essential for understanding the genesis of the document and its insertion within institutional relations.

In indexing, the persons involved may be considered under the categories Agent, which represents the entity that performs the action or operation (person, institution, organization, etc.), and Patient, which corresponds to the entity that undergoes or receives the action or operation. However, the literature indicates that, in some cases, both functions are treated exclusively as Agent. However, under the diplomatic method, both are indexed as author and addressee.

As a result of the foregoing, the subject of a document is constituted from the four dimensions identified by the diplomatic method, in close articulation with the indexing principles and the categories corresponding to each of them, as discussed above.

6.0 Conclusions

By incorporating the diplomatic method and its analytical dimensions into the indexing process, this study demonstrates that the subject of an archival record cannot be reduced to its explicit thematic content. When documentary form and record type, the juridical–functional nature of the recorded act, the internal elements of the record, and the actors involved in its creation are taken into account, the record's content can be apprehended more comprehensively. From this perspective, the subject of the record emerges from the articulation between form, function, and context. Rather than being conceived narrowly as the immediate thematic content of the record, it must be understood as a structured representation of the institutional act documented, reflecting the conditions under which it was created.

Within this framework, the dialogue established between Diplomatics and indexing contributes to strengthening the methodological foundations of conceptual analysis in archival environments. By introducing diplomatic dimensions as analytical categories for indexing, the approach proposed here offers a structured framework capable of supporting more consistent, context-sensitive, and conceptually grounded representation practices in archives. At the same time, this study contributes to the development of Archival Knowledge Organization as a specific domain within Knowledge Organization by highlighting the potential of diplomatic analysis to inform the identification and representation of archival concepts. Future research may further explore the operationalization of these dimensions and categories in indexing policies.

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