Queerlit – a bibliography of Swedish fiction with LGBTQI topics

Siska Humlesjö*1*, Jenny Bergenmar*2* and Arild Matsson*1*

1 GRIDH: Gothenburg Research Infrastructure for Digital Humanities, University of Gothenburg, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg, 40530 Sverige
2 Department of Literature, History of Ideas and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, 40530, Sweden

Abstract

This paper summarizes the project Queerlit: Metadata and Searchability for LGBTQ+ Literary Heritage 2020-2023 and discusses some challenges in the development of this resource.

The Queerlit project consist of four parts:

1. Creating a bibliography of Swedish fiction with LGBTQI themes
2. Creating a Swedish thesaurus (QLIT), adapted from the of the linked open data thesaurus Homosaurus
3. Assigning all material in the bibliography with subject headings from QLIT.
4. A web user interface for searching the material

All four parts are integrated with the Swedish union catalog, Libris, making the results of the project available for all under a CC0 license. QLIT is the first external thesaurus integrated in the linked open data framework used in the technical platform of Libris, XL.

The bibliography spans from rune stones from the 7th century to recently published fiction. When applying subject headings for the material both general aspects of the work and specific LGBTQI topics are described, making this the most comprehensive retrospective indexing project of Swedish literature to date. The underlying knowledge organization is made a prominent method of interacting with the search interface, which is empirically designed around the needs of various user groups.

Keywords

Linked open data, LGBTQI, bibliography, metadata

1. Introduction

How has LGBTQI-themed subject matter, identities, desires, and actions been portrayed in Swedish fiction literature? The three-year research project, Queerlit, has compiled existing works and provided them with subject headings to enhance their searchability for both scholars and the interested general public. This paper delineates the project, discusses the specific challenges that bibliographic metadata for literary fiction entails, and presents the achieved outcomes, as well as the functionalities available within the interface.

Queerlit originates from a perceived lack of information and discoverability of LGBTQI literature, experienced both from librarians' and scholars' perspectives [9]. Lacking adequate search tools, Swedish queer literature scholars have developed their own methods for identifying relevant literature, including searching full-texts resources for relevant terms, and using methods depending on contextual knowledge about certain intellectual environments or reading communities. Queerlit builds on these previous bibliographical efforts, and on information activism in digital environments, such as tagging and listing LGBTQ+ literature on social media to create a bibliography with descriptive metadata in order to serve scholars in the field, and a broader public. Queerlit is a cooperation between three Swedish universities and two libraries, KvinnSam, National resource library for gender studies at the University of Gothenburg, and the

National Library.[2] The project is transdisciplinary and involves the participation of literary scholars, researchers in library and information science, librarians, and a research engineer [8].

2. The bibliography

The bibliography compiles fiction written in the Swedish language, encompassing the geographical boundaries of contemporary Sweden, as well as literature produced in Sweden's national minority languages. In addition to fiction, some related literary forms have been included, such as letters and autobiographies. This literature must incorporate some form of LGBTQI thematic content, which, as defined by the project, pertains to the subversion of binary gender norms, same-sex sexual practices, emotions, and/or identities. Given that the purpose of the bibliography is to provide a comprehensive overview of how these themes have been portrayed in literature throughout various historical periods, all depictions are included, irrespective of their prominence and whether they are portrayed positively or negatively.

Throughout the project, additional inclusion criteria have been introduced, such as whether the works have been read or consumed by the LGBTQI community, or if they contain subtextual references to LGBTQI-related terminology, as exemplified by Tove Jansson's works featuring the Moomins, which include subtle allusions to LGBTQI sociolect.

To compile the bibliography and ensure its comprehensiveness, a range of methods have been employed, including:
- Previous literary research.
- Workshops involving interested readers.
- Full-text searches in the Literature Bank, a database for copyright-free Swedish fiction.
- Searches for relevant subject terms in library catalogs.
- Previous bibliographies in print and online, primarily created by interested readers.

In November 2023, the Queerlit bibliography contained 1719 indexed works, spanning from runestones to recently published works. The majority of the included works are published between 2000 and 2023 (approx. 1400), and only 16 titles were published before 1800, indicating both the difficulty of identifying relevant older literature, and the increased possibility to include manifest representation of LGBTQI motifs and characters from the later part of the 20th century until today.

3. The thesaurus

The thesaurus created, Queer Literature Indexing Thesaurus (QLIT), is a Swedish translation and adaptation of the Homosaurus thesaurus. The Homosaurus is maintained by the Digital Transgender Archive, built using linked open data, and has been in existence since 1997 [1]. The purpose of the Homosaurus is to supplement other thesauri (for example Library of Congress Subject Headings, LCSH). To develop a thesaurus tailored to the needs of the Queerlit bibliography, a list of subject terms from the Homosaurus that had been used to describe fiction in the Digital Transgender Archive and the Dutch IHLIA was compiled [2]. These terms were reviewed to assess their relevance to Swedish contexts, and the associated broader and narrower terms were included for these terms. Currently, QLIT comprises 876 terms, of which 750 are translations from Homosaurus, while 126 are unique to QLIT.

The unique terms can be broadly categorized as follows:
1. Differences in the use of the Swedish and English languages, such as between the English word "sex" and the Swedish word "kön."
2. Swedish context, including terms related to the Sami people, specific Swedish legal concepts like "gender identity assessment," and significant events in

Swedish LGBTQI history, such as the 1979 occupation of the National Board of Health and Welfare.

3. Terms describing actions rather than identity. In fiction, actions are often described without detailing the identity of the person performing the action. For example, it might involve a woman in a relationship with another woman where the action does not reveal whether the woman is lesbian or bisexual.

4. Terms describing symbolism. E.g. terms for rainbow symbolism and transformation symbolism.

Each term in the thesaurus is accompanied by a scope note that describes how the term should be used and under what circumstances. Term definitions are drawn from sources like organizations, such as the National Association of Afro-Swedes for terms related to individuals of African descent, and authorities like the WHO for terms related to young and older individuals. The thesaurus was developed iteratively, with new terms added during the indexing process, when the need for more precise descriptions was discovered. In this way, QLIT is not just a translation of the Homosaurus, it has also entailed the inclusion and definition of new terms that were not included in the Homosaurus. The entire thesaurus is published as linked data and integrated into the National Library's cataloging interface. The fact that the thesaurus is published as linked data allows for the terms to be modified as language evolves.

4. Indexing fiction in Queerlit

Fiction is typically indexed based on concrete aspects such as geographical location, the time period in which it is set, and genre [3]. While fiction in itself poses a challenge for topical descriptions, LGBTQI literature further complicates this issue. Capturing queer meanings in texts will entail a modification of common indexing norms, such as only capturing explicit representation. Further, Swedish fiction published before 2010 seldom has any subject headings applied to it. Swedish fiction published during 2005 has in average 1.5 subject headings per work, while work published in 2020 has 3.6. subject headings per work. As Queerlit indexes older literature, this means that the subject terms we assign often are the first terms applied.

In Sweden fiction for an adult audience is indexed using Svenska ämnesord (SAO), a broad subject headings list able to be applied to all types of literature, and fiction for children using the Children's subject headings list.

The general rule for indexing is that the subject matter needs to constitute a significant portion of the work, with a requirement of 20% for non-fiction literature. However, as Queerlit aims to encompass all literature with LGBTQI themes, even works where the LGBTQI theme is very peripheral are included. To address this issue without deviating from the cataloging formats in use, a solution has been implemented in which the peripheral terms are added to the holdings record, a record specific to Queerlit.

To reduce the risk of the applied terms being subjective interpretations by the indexing librarian, all indexed works are reviewed by another librarian. Furthermore, to enhance consistency, regular meetings are held to address issues and questions related to indexing.

5. The search interface

To improve accessibility of the bibliography and the thesaurus, a search interface website[3] was created. Naturally, like other data in Libris, the bibliography is available in the Libris website[4]. However, a number of important weaknesses form the need for a separate search website, which was clear at an early stage and formulated as one of the project goals. These include difficulties

---

[3] The search interface is available at https://queerlit.dh.gu.se/

[4] The Libris website is available at https://libris.kb.se/

with searching in sub bibliographies (such as Queerlit), inadequate support for searching around subject headings and a generally outdated user experience.

To kickstart the work with the search interface, two project-internal workshops were held. In these, we took inventory of the needs and expectations among various user groups, and compiled a list of desired functionality based on that. Somewhat later in the project, two surveys were carried out, directed towards general readers [5] and librarians [6]. The results indicated that existing library catalogues often lack opportunities to explore collections around subject headings.

Data in Libris is published freely under CC0, and is open for programmatic use through an Application Programming Interface (API). This provided functionality for nearly all of the primary needs, so a frontend–backend architecture was employed, relying on Libris as a backend service. Thus, development work was reduced to building a frontend application[5]. Additionally, another smaller backend service was created for the QLIT thesaurus, as described in [2].

In technical terms, the frontend application is built in Vue 3, a JavaScript framework. From the user's interaction with the webpage, it builds queries as HTTP GET requests for the Libris API, which responds with data in the JSON format. The frontend and the thesaurus backend are served to the web by GRIDH at the University of Gothenburg.

The search interface first took the form of a mockup site containing placeholders for core functionality. Soon, it was extended with a connection to the Libris API, adding interactive searching and real data. Since then, work has been ongoing progressively, adding functionality and revising elements of interaction design. Continuous collaboration with the Libris developer team at the National Library has ensured extended feature support in the Libris API for our benefit and theirs alike.

Previous research on user interfaces to collections was helpful in guiding this work. [4] A list of 21 "subject access features" has been developed [4], such as full-text search, auto-completion and hierarchical term search. Of these, ten are fully implemented and four partially implemented. Three items are still "on the wish list" (but one of these requires substantial changes to the Libris API), and four are not applicable to this data. [6]

As another method to guide the process, several rounds of user testing have been performed. In each of these sessions, a single user is given a few tasks, such as *"find what children's literature is in the database"*. Their usage of the interface is observed, and notes are taken and then used to identify potential improvements that merit further development. These notes have also been shared with the Libris developer team, as input for their planned development of a new Libris search interface.

A primary means for navigation and searching are the QLIT subject headings. This works in conjunction with the extensive indexing practice described in **Section 4**, and as such, reflects the underlying knowledge organization. The QLIT subject headings are shown in a prominent yellow color throughout the interface, as can be seen in **Figure 1**.

6. Conclusions

QLIT was the first external thesaurus to be integrated into Libris XL. This integration necessitated adjustments to functionality of Libris XL, and questions regarding the use of linked data were raised when practical issues emerged, such as the implications of an exact match between two concepts from different vocabularies. The ability to elucidate peripheral subjects without deviating from cataloging rules is another issue that has been brought to the forefront by the Queerlit project and has been raised as desirable for other databases as well. This will likely require a new relationship between works and vocabulary terms in the BIBFRAME cataloging format.

The Queerlit search interface also functions effectively as a model for the new Libris search interface that is currently under preparation. The relatively small scale of this project has been

---

[5] Code for the frontend application is published open-source at https://github.com/gu-gridh/queerlit-gui/

favorable in this regard. Through our collaboration, developers at the National Library are gaining insights from a real use case based on the same backend system.

For a project like Queerlit, building on past information activism, and community knowledge, navigating the constraints in various knowledge organization and technical systems is a question of ethics. What space do such systems allow for the lived experience of marginalized people, and how can we move beyond previous efforts to "correct" classification and indexing systems? [7] Developing more terms, and terms closer to the vernaculars in use in communities can be seen as an act of worldmaking [1], make visible actions and identities that have previously been misrepresented or silenced. As a linked open system, these terms can be re-used on other materials, as well as modified for future needs.

References

[1] M. Cifor, K.J. Rawson, Mediating Queer and Trans Pasts: The Homosaurus as Queer Information Activism, Information, Communication & Society, 26:11 (2023): 2168-2185, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2022.2072753

[2] A. Matsson, O. Kriström, Building and Serving the Queerlit Thesaurus as Linked Open Data. Digital Humanities in the Nordic and Baltic Countries Publications 5, no. 1 (October 10, 2023): 29–39. https://doi.org/10.5617/dhnbpub.10648.

[3] J. Saarti, Fiction indexing and the development of fiction thesauri, Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 31 (1999): 85-92.

[4] K. Golub, P. M. Ziolkowski, G. Zlodi, Organizing Subject Access to Cultural Heritage in Swedish Online Museums. Journal of Documentation 78 (2021): 211–47. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-05-2021-0094.

[5] K. Golub, J. Bergenmar, S. Humelsjö, Searching for Swedish LGBTQI Fiction: Challenges and Solutions. Journal of Documentation 78 (2022): 464–84. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-06-2022-0138.

[6] K. Golub, J. Bergenmar, S. Humelsjö, Searching for Swedish LGBTQI Fiction: The Librarians' Perspective. Journal of Documentation 79 (2023): 261–79. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-05-2023-0080.

[7] E. Drabinski, E, Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction. The Library Quarterly, 83 (2013): 94-111.

[8] M. Polk, Transdisciplinary Co-production: Designing and Testing a Transdisciplinary Research Framework for Societal Problem Solving. Futures 65 (2015): 110-122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2014.11.001.

[9] J. Bates, J. and J. Rowley, Social reproduction and exclusion in subject indexing: A comparison of public library OPACs and LibraryThing folksonomy. Journal of Documentation 67:3 (2011): 431-448. https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411111124532.