Rules for Archival Description and Encoded Archival Description:
Competing or Compatible Standards?

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In early 1997 Kent Haworth sent an inquiry to the Canadian archives listserv to find out who was planning to use EAD in Canada. I got in touch with him to express my interest in finding out about that too (at the time I was a student at the University of Michigan); he later related that mine was the only response. A little over four years later, the participation rate isn't a lot higher: The institutions I know about are:

> Saskatchewan/Manitoba Archival Information Network
> ARCHIEON (Ontario archival information network)
> University of New Brunswick Libraries (through its electronic text centre; an inter-institutional pilot project using literary finding aids)
> York University, Toronto
> University of Saskatchewan (developed web forms for SAIN/MAIN)
> University of British Columbia Special Collections (Xmetal; full finding aids; made use of EAD cookbook; adapting style sheets for RAD use)
> British Columbia Archives

Why aren't Canadian institutions moving in this direction?

To a large extent, reasons for not implementing EAD in Canada are very similar to reasons often cited in the States: lack of technical support/complexity of EAD; EAD is not an integrated management system; unable to accommodate authority files; EAD is a "Cadillac" standard which delivers more than is needed. This is compounded by the extra work needed to fit our existing content standard (RAD) into the structure of EAD. My own assessment is that EAD implementation in Canada has been low to date in part because of lack of guidance, and tools, specific to Canada. For fonds-level descriptions, the web forms developed for the Saskatchewan Archival Information Network were adapted for use in Ontario (ARCHIEON) and New Brunswick (literary finding aids project), so tools that "look like RAD" have certainly been welcomed. More about that later.

It's worth noting that there are institutions that don't "do EAD", i.e. store finding aids in EAD or use EAD files as the source for search engines, but that have the capability to export to EAD for the purposes of data exchange. For example, the Ontario provincial archives exports finding aids in EAD in order to participate in ARCHIEON, Ontario's archival information network. My understanding is that the database system used by CANWAN (comprised of B.C., Alberta, Yukon and the Northwest Territories), which uses MARC, has the capability of exporting to EAD. So the perspective of EAD as data exchange standard is certainly an important one. Indeed, this needs to go both ways. The provincial networks based in EAD need to be able to export to MARC in order to contribute records to the national database, the Canadian Archival Information Network.

EAD can potentially meet an important need for Canadian archives. RAD is a content standard for multi-level description. It does not prescribe outputs, so one can use RAD for preparing a range of descriptive products, including paper finding aids, card catalogues, or MARC catalogue records. This is in contrast to APPM, the American equivalent of RAD. While RAD and APPM are very similar in structure, APPM is quite focussed on MARC outputs.

Until the development of EAD, it was quite difficult to fully implement multi-level RAD description. At least, there was no data structure standard available. From the other direction, it is now acknowledged that EAD is lacking a good content standard. This was one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the CUSTARD project, which will attempt to harmonize RAD and APPM within the structure of ISAD(G) (this will be discussed in more detail in another session at this conference). While the resulting draft standard, similar to RAD, will not be focussed on EAD, the potential to have a good content standard was one reason for moving ahead with the project. One of RAD's advantages is the existence of detailed multi-level rules (e.g. what to put at fonds level versus what to put at file level for a scope and content). It's also an advantage that RAD does not prescribe outputs - but it may be a disadvantage that this flexibility is in the abstract; that is, implementation is very much up to individual institutions. In particular, RAD implementors have generally been unable to take good advantage of multi-level description, and such implementation has certainly not been uniform. EAD has the potential to address this problem.

Some have argued that the Canadian archival community should develop a dedicated document type definition for RAD. (Indeed, I found a listserv posting, dated September 1997, in which I argued the same thing. I have since seen the error of my ways!) The argument is essentially that RAD gives rise to a data structure, and that it would be much better to use a DTD that fits perfectly with RAD rather than trying to fit RAD into an American standard. Ideally, the argument goes, the data structure standard should follow the data content standard.

While it might be possible to create such a DTD (the basic structure is fairly straightforward), EAD has highly developed options in terms of container lists, linking to outside resources, linking within a finding aid, table and list structures, etc. Perhaps more importantly, a national DTD would cut off the possibility of international exchange of descriptive information. A better approach, from my point of view, is to support the increasing internationalization of EAD. This includes promotion of new EAD elements when necessary (especially when ISAD(G) also has an element), with accommodation of other RAD elements (especially in the note area) using attributes when possible. The use of attributes generally provides a high degree of flexibility. In addition to notes (many of which need to be mapped to <odd>), access points are one area where this applies. In particular, using the ROLE attribute, one can designate very specific access point (provenance access points, author access points, name of person holding an office, custodial access point, etc.) as outlined in RAD.

This approach – using EAD, relying on attributes where necessary – increases the need for good documentation about how to use RAD with EAD. That is, a Canadian archivist would not be able to rely only on the EAD tag library. Currently, the Canadian documentation available is fairly minimal.

On the other hand, the American experience with file lists (container lists) will certainly be relevant for Canadians. Correctly or not, archivists in Canada prepare file and item lists but don't necessarily think about these as components of a RAD description, even if RAD elements

are being used. A large part of the challenge relating to file lists, though, is the retroactive conversion of a wide variety of finding aids. While RAD can be used to design new finding aids, it is less often used to deal with the retroactive conversion of file lists – if only because most archives don't have the resources to deal with conversion at that level. As a result, Canadian archivists should draw on the experiences of American EAD implementations.

So just how compatible is RAD with EAD? In 1997, the Canadian Committee on Data Structure Standards investigated this question; it prepared a so-called "RAD/EAD matrix". The committee found a fairly good degree of compatibility. There are problems with item-level description, since several item-specific elements are not available in EAD. Not all RAD notes are available either, but these can be mapped to <odd> (other descriptive data), with a type attribute if needed.

Some elements can not necessarily be handled through attributes, e.g. the class of material specific details area (for data such as scale of architectural drawings). An EAD element for material specific details is supposed to be added during the current round of revisions. The data structure committee also objected to the placement of <custodhist> (custodial history) in <admininfo> (administrative information), since in RAD the Custodial History element appears in the Archival Description Area (at the heart of the description); it is considered important information, not merely administrative. In fact, this hints at the main discrepancy between RAD and EAD; the basic structures are quite different, particularly in terms of <admininfo> and <add> as opposed to the Note Area. The proposed "unbundling" of <admininfo> should address this and allow more flexibility in terms of grouping elements. Element re-ordering, possible with XML, may also make this issue somewhat moot.

Where attributes are needed for granularity, the Canadian Committee on Archival Description (which maintains RAD) may have a role in recommending attribute values. Once the EAD changes are finalized, I will be circulating a report outlining the implications for Canadian implementation (as well as an updated RAD/EAD matrix). We will also need to consider what further documentation and tools are needed. Some additional tools may be provided by various institutions. For example, the perl scripts relating to the web form that I developed has been shared with other institutions, although work is needed to make the scripts easily adaptable. Similarly, as Canadian institutions begin using other applications (e.g. XMetal) and developing XSLT stylesheets, documentation could be shared.

A lot of EAD work, certainly in the projects I've been involved in, have been focussed on the higher levels of description (generally fonds and series). To facilitate creation of EAD descriptions, an important principle has been to "hide" the EAD from staff preparing descriptions. That is, our view is that staff preparing descriptions should not have to learn the EAD tag structure (or for that matter, even have to be aware of the existence of EAD). This decision was made particularly in the context of the Saskatchewan union list project. Most archival repositories in Saskatchewan are small, and many are run by volunteers. We have accomplished this goal through the development of a web form (with the EAD created using a perl script). This has a number of advantages:

- Data entry can focus on RAD (the content) rather than EAD (the structure). In particular, the form can be organized in a way that's familiar to RAD users (e.g., with custodial history in its usual place, rather than with administrative information). That is, the RAD to EAD mapping takes place behind the scenes. This is especially important for RAD elements within the note area, many of which are mapped to EAD through attributes.
- Similarly, the web form allows an institution or consortium to standardize the mandatory or recommended elements. (The disadvantage is that, short of a more sophisticated application, the elements being used are not customizable except by amending the script.)
- Punctuation is also taken care of behind the scenes; either by having the perl script add the punctuation at time of conversion (form to EAD), or by have the stylesheet add the punctuation, as needed.

The web form and scripts developed for Saskatchewan and Manitoba have also been adapted for the Ontario union list project and the New Brunswick literary finding aids project, and I have had enquiries from other institutions, so this approach seems to have its attractions. So far, it has not been extended to the file level, and it might be difficult to do so. The other hand, the process of developing forms for file lists would likely lead to more standardized file lists (which might be difficult to extend beyond a single institution, given our penchant for idiosyncratic file lists).

A balance needs to be struck between using EAD DTD to provide guidance (e.g. important elements) and having a content standard or institutional guidelines give the lead. With existence of RAD, for example, <odd> with a type attribute is enough. This can especially be accommodated within the web forms method. But if someone is using Xmetal or another authoring product, it can be seen as a problem that RAD's structure is different than EAD, and in particular that there are elements missing. That is, the ideal would be for recognizable tags to be available from a pull-down list. Proposed changes to the DTD (the unbundling of admininfo) should at least make the structure more accommodating. I understand that there may also be techniques to provide closed lists of attributes (implemented locally), using parameter entities.

To answer the question in the title of my paper, then, I would definitely argue that RAD and EAD are compatible, not competing, standards. The adoption of RAD has been very widespread in Canada, so there is little chance that Canadian archives will try to adopt EAD without using RAD as the content standard. However, as I have discussed, the challenge is to give Canadian archivists the documentation and the tools needed in order to implement both RAD and EAD.