academic librarians? The interactive fic-
tions Douglas cites are buried in the very
substantial bibliography she provides,
but one wonders whether English bibli-
ographers are going to check these against
the local online catalog, order them, and
then have them marked and parked, ei-
ther literally or virtually. The real value
of Douglas’s book for academics, sup-
posed experts in books and reading, is the
opportunity it gives us to review our own
assumptions about how and why people
use the contents of our libraries, how and
why people read. Perhaps a considered
examination of these questions will move
us to create collections that are more valu-
able and serviceable to our users.—Cecile
M. Jagodzinski, Illinois State University.

Svenonius, Elaine. The Intellectual Foun-
dations of Information Organization.
Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Pr. (Digital Li-
braries and Electronic Publishing),
2000. 255p. $37, alk. paper (ISBN 0-262-
19433-3). LC 99-41301.

In this book, information organization
means bibliographic organization. The
first half of the book discusses the objec-
tives of organization, the character of the
objects to be organized, the main devices
used to organize, and the principles gov-
erning the selection and application of
organizing devices. The objects to be or-
ganized are bibliographic entities: works
and their appearances as documents. The
primary organizing device is description
using special bibliographic languages,
which can be analyzed in terms of vo-
cabulary, semantics, syntax, and pragmat-
ics (terms, meanings, combinations of
terms, language application rules). The
second half discusses the languages used
for organization: work languages, docu-
ment languages, and subject languages.
Work and document languages get a
chapter each, subject languages get three
chapters (vocabulary, semantics, syntax,
but, strikingly, no pragmatics). The aim
of the work is to synthesize a body of
knowledge that has been developed in the
(largely) Anglo-American tradition of li-
brary cataloging over the past 150 years:
not a summary or outline of codes and
thesauri and classification schemes but,
rather, a survey of problems to be solved
and alternative means of solution. For
instance, half of chapter nine concerns the
problem of multiple meaning in subject
description languages and reviews the
alternative ways of disambiguation (e.g.,
domain specification, parenthetical qual-
fiers, scope notes, hierarchical displays).
This is the kind of information that is of
interest far beyond the library, and the
book aims to be of interest and use not
only to the theorist of bibliographic orga-
nization, but also to the designers of in-
formation systems generally.

Posing the organizational problem as
a linguistic one of devising and applying
special languages for describing works,
authors, and subjects has great concep-
tual advantages. It makes it easy to see
that descriptive cataloging is as centrally
concerned with vocabulary control as is
subject cataloging, while also providing
a striking way of insisting on the logical
and practical differences between descrip-
tion of works and description of docu-
ments, by calling for different descriptive
languages. It has the interesting conse-
quence of repositioning classification by
viewing it in terms of syntax and semi-
tics of linguistic description rather than,
say, as mainly a matter of marking for
physical placement or assigning abstract
locations in a universal classification of
knowledge, thus bringing subject catalog-
ing and classification closer together. (It
is less successful in integrating indexing
with cataloging, for reasons to be seen).
By making vocabulary control the heart
of the matter, it sharply focuses attention
on the contrast between searching in
unregimented free text and searching in
bibliographically regimented files. It
highlights the question of whether or to
what extent the expensive intellectual la-
bor of cataloging and indexing can be
automated, while at the same time rais-
ing questions about the applicability of
originally book-oriented practices to a
world of new kinds of information-bear-
ing objects. The chapter on document lan-
guages is understandably preoccupied with the problems of fitting old descriptive practices to new media, especially electronic documents. Svenonius does not assume that the bibliographic record will continue to play its old role in the new bibliographical universe; in the future, information systems may rely on electronic documents to be self-describing, and the bibliographical universe may be a partly or largely self-organizing one. Perhaps in the future, the theory of bibliographic description will simply be replaced by a theory of bibliographic searching. Still, however practice develops (and she does not attempt to predict this), basic objectives and ontological distinctions will survive; technicalities depend on changing technology, but intellectual foundations, including theory, are “relatively impervious to change.” The basic problems dealt with by the tradition will not disappear.

But is this right? What if the intellectual foundations really were built to justify the limits of old technologies? The case of subject description is especially suspicious. Throughout this book, the goal of collocating all documents on the same subject is taken as fundamental, and it is never questioned that this goal can, in principle, be attained by assigning a single subject description to each document. It is, in effect, a basic assumption or postulate of classical cataloging that each single work has a single subject (though the subject might have no established name and one may not want to ask about the subject of some kinds of works, for instance works of fiction). This is why theoretical treatment of indexing is hard to integrate with similar treatment of cataloging. For indexing, a big theoretical question is the question of indexing depth, the postulate of the single subject is a joke, and the traditional library catalog is an exhibition of maximum superficiality. That postulate, as absurdly oversimplified as it is, makes some sense as rationalizing a system whose main weight was once on assigning a single shelf location to each book and economizing on the assignment of subject headings, too. In a world of new technology and new bibliographical objects, however, it looks like a quaint survivor with no further purpose. For a general indexing theory, the question of when a single content description is adequate and how one decides what that description is to be is an important and interesting one, but it is unlikely that it will be satisfactorily explored by anyone who accepts that old postulate. It is very telling that there is no chapter on the pragmatics of subject languages; this is partly because, as the author says, most languages are fairly undeveloped in their pragmatics and past study of bibliographical pragmatics has not generally been fruitful. But this itself ought to raise eyebrows: those secure foundations had little useful to say about the application of subject descriptions? Time, then, to start afresh.

It should be emphasized that Svenonius’s book is itself a striking piece of organization of information, though not of the kind dealt with in the book; it is not itself an example of what it is about. It is a piece of analysis and synthesis, not a bibliographical organization of works. It is exactly the sort of work one might use a catalog to try to discover, if one did not have a better way. Svenonius emphasizes as one of the objectives of bibliographical systems that of navigation, served in catalogs by an apparatus of relationships among terms. Navigation is indeed a good name for a crucial objective, but there are many ways to help people navigate in the bibliographical universe, just as there are many ways to organize information to put into that universe and to organize the things after they are put there. What I ordinarily hope for is not to have to use a library catalog’s navigational helps, or to use a library catalog at all, but, rather, to have someone such as a reference librarian or colleague or reviewer steer me toward the one thing I need, for instance, the one fine starting point, the one magisterial survey of a territory, such as this book.—

Patrick Wilson, University of California, Berkeley.