Society of Archivists Data Standards Group

A Guide to Archival and Related Standards
Standards applicable to archives; for the digital delivery of repository guides, finding-aids, and images of material from collections.

Title: UNESCO Thesaurus

Name of Standards Developing Organisation:
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

Current version

Replaces

Abstract
The UNESCO Thesaurus is a controlled and structured list of subject terms covering broad areas of knowledge. It enables subjects to be expressed consistently across different datasets and services that use it.

Description
Subject indexing can provide a way to represent the significant subjects associated with collections in a way that helps users to discover them. It enables users to cross-search more effectively by subject. A user can undertake a subject search in order to limit their results to only those collections that are significantly related to the subject. Other possible advantages include the ability to provide links to related subjects through a browse function, and the ability to be more innovative with linking to other kinds of data through subjects.

For archivists, there are a number of options available for selecting subject terms to use. The UNESCO thesaurus is one, and the other general thesauri are the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and the UK Archival Thesaurus (UKAT), discussed in the July 2011 edition of ARC. There are a number of other thesauri that are more subject specific, such as the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH).

The UNESCO thesaurus was first published in 1977. The second edition was published in 1995. It is currently published as a CD-ROM and available from UNESCO publishing, but it can also be searched via the UNESCO website: http://databases.UNESCO.org/thesaurus/
The thesaurus is used for the resources available in the UNESCO Documentation Network (UNESDOC), the database of the organisation’s documents and publications.

The UNESCO website provides an alphabetical display and a hierarchical display for the thesaurus.

If you enter a search term in the alphabetical search, you can see that the UNESCO thesaurus links terms together in a number of ways.

1) It provides broader and narrower terms. Thus, you can search for ‘musicians and see this in the context of the broader ‘parent’ term of ‘performers’ and the more specific narrower term of ‘composers’. A search for a very broad term such as ‘biology’ provides a long list of narrower terms. This helps you to pinpoint the term that is most appropriate for you to use to index your collection.

2) It provides associative relationships, showing similar or related terms. ‘Musicians’ is related to ‘music’, for example, and ‘botany’ is related to ‘zoology’.

3) It steers you from ‘non-preferred terms’ that are not part of the thesaurus, to ‘preferred terms’ that are. A search for ‘medicines’ refers you to ‘drugs’ as the preferred term.

Using the hierarchical display provides you with access to the ‘microthesauri’. These relate to seven major subject domains. For example, the subject domain of ‘Culture’ includes religion, history, visual arts and performing arts as microthesauri. The display of these smaller thesauri is identical to the main display, allowing you to browse around the terms provided.

Other features of the thesaurus include:

• Scope notes for some terms, though many do not include this. For example, ‘biotechnology’ is described as ‘Utilization of biological organisms, processes and systems to make or modify products, to improve plants or animals, or to develop microorganisms for specific uses.’

• French, Spanish and Russian equivalents of English terms

• Links to resources catalogued in the UNESDOC database, which may be of help in showing how the subject terms are used to index a range of resources.

The UNESCO Thesaurus provides a number of advantages: it is a large thesaurus, it is continually updated and it reflects European history and culture. It is easy to use – you can just enter search terms and use the navigation through broader and narrower terms to find the appropriate subject.
It may not meet all the needs of archivists in the UK. The thesaurus was not developed with archives in mind, which is why you may find the UKAT thesaurus, specifically developed for the archival community, more appropriate. But it does strike a balance between comprehensiveness and complexity. The Library of Congress Subject Headings enables you to be significantly more specific, but they can be difficult to apply.

**Next month**

Next month we will look at MARC 21, a standard for the representation and communication of bibliographic information in computer-readable form, and its application to archives.

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