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Review

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# Ethnographic Thesaurus of the American Folklore Society

In the fall of 2007 the American Folklore Society posted the *Ethnographic Thesaurus* on its website.

As early as 1988 a group has been established with the task to examine the need and possibility of creating a controlled dictionary of folklore. In the year 2000 a Workgroup for the ethnographic thesaurus was formed. The group's work has been funded by five institutions, including the Library of Congress as the world's central institution for creating thesauruses.

The workgroup consists of four members and thirteen advisory board members. The members are: David Betty, lexicographer, a renowned expert in classification and indexing; Jill Ann Johnson, subject indexing expert, a trained ethnomusicologist and PhD candidate;<sup>1</sup> Camilla H. Mortensen, who is also an expert in subject indexing, holds a PhD in comparative literature; her scientific interests include narrative theories and ethnographic ethics; and Kristin Cooper Rainey, database administrator and holder of MA in library sciences and sociolinguistics. The advisory board consists of distinguished folklorists, librarians, archivists and documentation specialists, who are always up to date with terminology and subject indexing.

The content description of the thesaurus states that "it can be used to improve access to information about folklore, ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and related fields". This definition makes it clear that the area of classes and terminology of the thesaurus is very extensive and different than our notions of ethnography. Again, at least two problems emerge: the unclear definitions of "our" profession and different concepts of certain professions. Although it bears the name *Ethnographic Thesaurus*, it is interesting that the description of its content does not mention ethnography at all! However, the explanation of why this is an ethnographic thesaurus is contained else-

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<sup>1</sup> Her doctoral thesis is related to our region: she examines the East-European diaspora in Washington State. She also deals with folklore music of the Balkans.

where: “the thesaurus is focused on disciplines that use ethnographic methodology – the systematic description of traditional and creative expressive culture, especially the one relating to field research.”<sup>2</sup>

The thesaurus is organized according to the principles of a genuine thesaurus: containing hierarchies, relations between superordinate and subordinate terms and facets or classes. Numerous terms consisting of syntagms, such as *human settlement planning*, are precoordinated. Interrelation between the terms is displayed through a common relation network: it points from non-descriptors to descriptors; broader terms are connected to both narrow and related terms. The definitions are provided for top terms, and only when there is a perceived need to explain a term. The terms are not followed by definitions, which is often the case with thesauruses. Apart from the thesaurus, the web-site also contains a dictionary of terminology contained in the thesaurus, which simplifies the usage and navigation for many experts that are not familiar with the principles of organization and terminology in a thesaurus. It also explains the thesaurus structures and categories and lists sources; it is also possible to suggest terms, just like in any virtual dictionary, so it can be said that this thesaurus is very detailed, trying to provide maximum usability for the widest range of experts.

Names of top term categories in the thesaurus are the following: *General, Belief, Ritual, Health, Migration and Settlement, Human Dynamics, Law and Governance, Education, Entertainment and Recreation, Art, Language, Verbal Arts and Literature, Music, Dance, Material Culture, Foodways, Work, Performance, Transmission, Beings, Space and Place, Time, Disciplines, Research, Theory, and Methodology and Documentation*. These 25 categories show the scope of the thesaurus which covers almost all knowledge, skills and techniques, and it is difficult to find an area that is not represented. Of course, ethnography enters all of these areas, but the question remains: where is the limit. If you perform a search, either alphabetically or using key words, you will also find *museology*, as a narrower term of *museum work*, together with *museums* (this seems disputable), which is a narrower term than *information management approaches*. I only give this as an example of the comprehensiveness of the thesaurus. There are also terms from the more recent science on garbage – *garbagology*: *garbage with objects and products of material culture* as a broader term and *electric appliance waste, food waste, paper waste, plastic waste, recycled waste, sewage* as narrower terms. The terms related to garbage are *garbage cans* and *waste management*. This gives insight into the comprehensiveness of the thesaurus.

*Material culture* contains the following narrower terms: *agents of material culture (human), general processes and techniques, objects and products of material culture, raw materials, tools and equipment*. Terms narrower than *objects and products of material culture* include: *building and construction, body adornments and alterations, furnishings, textiles* and others. Terms related to *textiles* are: *clothing, story cloths, tapestries* and others.

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<sup>2</sup> American linguistics does not even use the term ‘ethnology’, while ethnography is considered the key term of cultural anthropology, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnography>

Let us try entering the field, facet or class we are currently working on - *economy*.<sup>3</sup> Within the Museum's activities, and following the initiative of Ivan Šestan as advisor for the ethnographic museums of Croatia, the work on the thesaurus of ethnographic museum items was launched in 2006. The thesaurus is being created by Irena Kolbas and Aleksandra Vlatković, with the help of curators who are working on ethnographic collections in Croatia. This class is located in the *Ethnographic Thesaurus* under the class *Work* as one in the series of narrower terms, including *agriculture and forestry* and *mariculture*, which are all the terms covered by our term *economy*. However, this also includes terms such as *pensioners*, *work ethic*, *work environment*, *employment*, *strike-breaking* etc.

Using the above example, I wanted to demonstrate the different understanding of the term 'ethnography' among American experts, which makes this thesaurus only partially useful in our ethnography, at least in the way in which it is still largely accepted in our profession. Since we are working on the thesaurus of ethnographic museum items, an important difference lies in the fact that for now we are mostly focused on terms from material culture, primarily peasant culture in the past, as they make most of the holdings of our ethnographic museums. Another important difference is the fact that our thesaurus is full of local terms that do not have corresponding terms in standard language, so it is necessary, for the sake of consistency, to define all descriptors.

The *Ethnographic Thesaurus*, in the form currently available at The American Folklore Society's website, is the result of a comprehensive and exceptionally professional work by a large number of experts. Its relevance far exceeds its name – *Ethnographic Thesaurus*, as it can also be used by experts from many other disciplines, not only ethnography. This is substantiated by the fact that a group of top experts are working on it and most of them are neither ethnographers, nor ethnologists.

*Translated by Ivona Grgurinović*

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<sup>3</sup> The name of this class already has several meanings in Croatian: 1) domain or estate, 2) estate management, 3) economy, 4) overall wealth and goods on surface and below. The meaning of this term in ethnography would be the closest to 3), in the context of life in the village from Anič's Encyclopedic Dictionary, p. 396.