

Irena Kolbas

Etnografski muzej

Zagreb

ikolbas@etnografski-muzej.hr

UDK 025.43:39

39.01.001.4

Review

Received: May 22, 2006

Accepted: July 11, 2006

# Thesaurus of Ethnology but Cultural Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

*In this article I am discussing the problems of creating a thesaurus of ethnology and/or cultural anthropology. Judging from their scope, this discipline is, as it seems from the current state of affairs, and the question of definition, primarily terminological problem. In the creation of a thesaurus an additional problem is the fact that this discipline deal with and include all the areas of human activities and this is probably the main reason why an adequate and generally accepted thesaurus for this field does not exist, not only in Croatia, but generally, in the world.*

**Key words:** thesaurus of ethnology, terminology, ethnology, cultural anthropology

## Introduction

Taking into consideration the fact that a textbook by William A. Haviland, titled *Cultural Anthropology* has been recently published in Croatian language and that it has been reviewed by Croatian ethnologists, it seems that the name of this discipline is currently accepted as the synonym for ethnology, which was in the first instance officially accepted in defining the activities and research practices of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research (Prica 1998/1999:204) and 'in the last few years' (<http://www.ffzg.hr/etno/povijest.htm>) at the Department of Ethnology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb which changed its name into the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology. Whether in line with the growing trend of interdisciplinar-

---

<sup>1</sup> Here paraphrasing article by Ins Prica (1998/1999), entitled 'Ethnology but Anthropology', a good example of a discussion dealing with the definitions of 'our' discipline.

ity, polidisciplinarity and multidisciplinary, all (or some) of the mentioned disciplines will become an integral part of culturology, anthropology or some other scientific discipline, the time will show.

## Definitions of “our discipline”

My intention here is not to discuss the definitions of ethnology, cultural anthropology, social anthropology, ethno-anthropology (or, generally, anthropology), folkloristics or even culturology. Numerous discussions are already written on this subject, there are many definitions whose relevance (if existing at all) changes in time and inside certain scientific circles<sup>2</sup>.

For writing a thesaurus we primarily need the definitions of the disciplines for which we create the thesaurus network. Definitions of scientific disciplines form a framework for the writing of a thesaurus. As an example, I’m outlining here some of the current existing definitions of related (or identical) terms<sup>3</sup>:

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. ethnology             | 1. ‘ethnologist is an anthropologist who is studying cultures from comparative and historical standpoint using ethnographic accounts’ (Haviland 14)                           |
|                          | 2. ‘a branch of anthropology studying the division of humanity on different races and their origin and the division according to certain characteristics’ (thefreedictionary) |
| 2. ethnography           | 1. ‘a systematic <sup>4</sup> description of a specific culture, based on direct observation’ (Haviland 14)   |
| 3. cultural anthropology | 1. ‘a branch of anthropology studying human culture and society’ (thefreedictionary) <sup>5</sup>   |
|                          | 2. ‘a branch of anthropology focused on human behaviour’ (Haviland 8)   |
| 4. social anthropology   | 1. ‘a branch of anthropology studying human culture and society’ (thefreedictionary)  |

---

<sup>2</sup> I have to remember here a period of existence of Croatian language when the name of the language was avoided in the textbooks, and a nice euphemism ‘our language’ was used instead.

<sup>3</sup> I am outlining only the disciplines which should, in my opinion, be primarily included in the thesaurus, according to their ‘significance’ for the topic I am discussing

<sup>4</sup> Ethnography is, to put it simply, a description of specific segments of folk or traditional life and the systematic approach is achieved only through synthesis, which means, through ethnological and not ethnographic work!

<sup>5</sup> According to thefreedictionary cultural and social anthropology are the same disciplines

5. ethnoanthropology<sup>6</sup>

## 6. anthropology

1. 'a social science studying human origin and social relations' (thefreedictionary)
2. 'study of human species on all the times and places of its existence' (Haviland 5)<sup>7</sup>

7. folkloristics<sup>8</sup>

1. 'study of folklore', 'deals with intercultural comparisons of themes, motifs, genres and structures from literary and ethnological aspect' (Haviland 382)

8. culturology<sup>9</sup>

## 9. culture

1. culture '...could be understood as standards, usually unconscious, through which social communities or groups of people act' (Haviland 10), 'ideas, values and norms which are shared by the members of a certain society and which enable them to interpret experience and develop certain modes of behavior, where they are manifested' (ibid 34)
2. 'all knowledge and values shared by a society', 'attitudes towards art and customs representing a certain society' (thefreedictionary)<sup>10</sup>

## 10. garbology

'study of society through the analysis of garbage' (thefreedictionary)

Here we could list other definitions relevant to ethnology, such as material and non-material culture, tradition, hierology, but I only chose the most important ones as examples. Already these several randomly chosen examples point to the lack of the generally accepted definitions: some, even though still commonly used, are completely outdated and inappropriate (the definition of ethnology as a scientific discipline dealing with the races!), some are 'lucky enough' not to exist at all (ethnoanthropology), and some, featuring in university textbooks, do not even have a definition! Haviland in a small chapter on ethnology, next to five other different definitions (that of ethnologist, ethnography, participant observation, holistic perspective and informants) does not bring any definition of ethnology in general! (14). He also calls ethnology social anthropology.

---

<sup>6</sup> This term is not defined neither by Haviland nor thefreedictionary

<sup>7</sup> According to Haviland ethnology or socio-cultural anthropology is just a part of cultural anthropology together with archeology and linguistic anthropology (11)

<sup>8</sup> Thfreedictionary does not bring any definition of this term

<sup>9</sup> Thfreedictionary does not bring any definition of this term

<sup>10</sup> I am outlining here only a few definitions of culture which I considered relevant for this paper; thefreedictionary lists eight different definitions of culture with examples

About the object, content and scope of research in ethnology/cultural anthropology, there were also many disputes, which made the defining of the network of the concepts which should be included in the thesaurus, even more difficult. Fortunately, thesauri are not 'bibles' or 'holy scriptures', they are structured lists of concepts which change with the development of science and human activities and from which certain concepts fall out as outdated and certain new, relevant ones, get included. However, the problems with defining the scope of the concepts do not end here.

Ethnology covers a broad range of different fields: architecture, clothing, food, social organization, customs and beliefs, common law, folk medicine, literature, etc. and therefore covers all human knowledge and beliefs. Thesaurus of ethnology will inevitably list concepts borrowed from other sciences: architecture, design, nutrition, sociology, ethics, law, medicine and pharmacy, theory of literature, theory of culture in general. On these meeting points between two or several different scientific disciplines, the already existing thesauri of these disciplines should be used. But, again, the problems of ethnology thesaurus do not end here either.

## Terminology of ethnology or cultural anthropology

The multi-titled discipline of ethnology or cultural anthropology, or whatever name we use, has in its content some terms and concepts that implicitly belong to this discipline, and that mostly relates to the large number of dialectisms, as compared to other disciplines. This can be rather easily resolved, we simply choose one descriptor and from all other terms we can point to that selected descriptor. Generally, this descriptor should be a term coming from standard language, while dialectisms and localisms can be referred to as non-descriptors. However, there are a number of terms which simply do not have a standard variant, but they differ from one locality to the other. This can also be solved if we choose one dialectism/localism as a descriptor, but here we have another problem which can be easily explained using the following example: if we choose as a descriptor one dialectal variant, for example *rajngla* (a term mostly used in the northwestern part of Croatia), it will be totally inappropriate, maybe even incomprehensible as the name for the same object in, for example, Dalmatia, where this object is called *teća*. Right now I do not know how to solve this problem.; in this case we are dealing with synonyms, but we would certainly have to choose descriptors for such terms as well. Here we can also encounter a problem with archaisms and neologisms. Since language is alive and changes constantly, some terms are completely abandoned or forgotten, some are still remembered<sup>11</sup>, but not used, while some are replaced by the new ones. In a thesaurus, we can resolve this by listing synonyms and by choosing a preferred descriptor, but it is not always easy to make this choice. But this brings us to the level of concrete examples, and we still

---

<sup>11</sup> Conservative ethnologists still insist on old and archaic terms as a part of tradition!

have not resolved the major divisions. My intention is to give incentive for the creation of a relevant ethnology thesaurus in Croatian language, but only by enumerating all the problems we are going to face in its production we will not achieve anything, except for a chronic ‘whining’ of numerous ethnologists over the unresolved questions of ‘our’ discipline.

The National Library of Serbia has published a thesaurus of ethnology, and even though they are aware that they still have to amend it, they have a thesaurus which can serve as a tool not only to librarians, museum workers and experts from related disciplines, but which is also another structured dictionary of a language for specific purposes. This thesaurus contains many problematic terms and relations between different concepts, but a perfect thesaurus does not exist, no more than a perfect dictionary. Here they started with the general division on the 25 areas of human knowledge and expertise. At the first sight, it seems strange that dialectology is not listed under linguistics, or that paleography is listed under this discipline, even though it is commonly accepted as a historical discipline. However, I presume that the author had a good reason to use this division<sup>12</sup>. It seems that the author has partly followed the Universal Decimal Classification, which is one of the commonly used tools by librarians who deal with classifications.

## How to reach up to a thesaurus of ethnology?

Here it is important to explain the basic difference between classification, list of concepts and keywords and a real thesaurus<sup>13</sup>.

Classification refers to divisions and subdivisions of human knowledge and skills, and it can be written in alphabetical or numerical order. The basic example is the decimal classification.

Lists of concepts and keywords are simple, usually alphabetical, lists of concepts used as basic expert terminology inside a certain discipline. Keywords are determined in two ways: by choosing terms from texts (KWIT) or from already existing lists of terms out of texts (KWOT). When determining keywords, it is important to avoid general concepts, and if they are listed, than in brackets you should also list the areas in which they are used. The example is the term ‘analysis’ which can be used in many disciplines and so in a text from the field of mathematics, as a key word, we should put ‘analysis (mathematics)’.

Thesauri are semantically structured lists of concepts, without the definition of the concept as such. They are actually a form of dictionary, with two basic differences:

---

<sup>12</sup> This thesaurus ‘badly’ needs constructive criticism, since it is full of mistakes and, to put it mildly, of unusual terms and classifications.

<sup>13</sup> Here I will outline only the most significant characteristics of the above mentioned concepts in the context of explaining and distinguishing the thesauri from other forms of terminology lists.

alphabetical dictionaries are alphabetical lists of terms usually with grammar descriptions (nouns, verbs, etc.), definitions and, possibly, etymologies. Thesauri are clusters of semantic concepts (names, terms), which share a semantic network: the chosen term is a descriptor, the non-chosen ones are the non-descriptors, they are listed as such, and from them the user is pointed to the descriptor by a guideline (such as see:); commonly they do not contain definitions or grammar descriptions, even though sometimes they do, together with the references from which the definitions came from.

The thesaurus hierarchy contains:

- Descriptors (D)
- Non-descriptors (ND)
- Broader Terms (BT)<sup>14</sup>
- Narrower Terms (NT)
- Related Terms (RT)
- Synonyms (S)
- Antonyms (Ant.)

The Norm ISO 2788 defines the following bilingual abbreviations:

- 1) SN/N (scope notes) notes on the application or the definition
- 2) UF/UZ (use for) pointing to non-recommended synonyms
- 3) TT/NP (top term) pointing to the top term in the hierarchy (if necessary)
- 4) BT/ŠP pointing to broader terms
- 5) NT/UP pointing to narrower terms
- 6) RT/SP pointing to related terms<sup>15</sup>.

For the more detailed explanation of the way in which the thesaurus is structured, I will use the following example from the possible ethnology thesaurus:

- D: house
- ND: hiža (dialectal term for house)
- BT: housing (architecture?)
- NT: room
- RT: building, tent
- Syn: accommodation facility
- Ant: ----

---

<sup>14</sup> With broader and narrower terms there is also a subdivision on the basis of generic and partitive relations (relation whole:part)

<sup>15</sup> HRN ISO 2788:1999 Documentation – Guidelines for the creation and development of unilingual thesauri, Section 9.2.1

It is obvious that the existence and the number of non-descriptors, synonyms and antonyms depend on the chosen descriptor.

## Conclusion

I think that the further elaboration of the technique of creating a thesaurus is not necessary here, I will only mention that one of the first and until today the most relevant thesauri is Roget's Thesaurus from 1852, which still serves as a model for the creation of a thesaurus. This is an example of thesaurus of general language. As a relevant thesaurus of the language for specific purposes, I would here like to mention Getty's Art and Architecture Thesaurus (ATT) as one of the best and most detailed expert thesauri for the disciplines which at least partly intertwine with ethnology, and still we have ethnography and museology.

When writing a thesaurus, it is important to know the purpose of it, because this will also determine which terms will be included into this thesaurus. If we are creating a thesaurus for, for example, an ethnographic museum, then such a thesaurus will have to include all the possible names for the objects (as descriptors or some other terms) which can be found in a museum, together with all the concepts related to museography. But today such a thesaurus would have to, besides the concepts and terms related to material heritage also include concepts and terms related to intangible heritage. I repeat, because this is important, that no thesaurus is ever complete and as a language changes, the concepts and terms in a thesaurus will also change, but it still has to include as many relevant terms as possible, include all the names (concepts, terms) of the objects necessary for the procession of museum material, in this case, ethnographic material. This is a very demanding task, from my experience in working with the thesauri, probably one of the most difficult, primarily because the above mentioned problems with the unclear definitions of the disciplines and the non-existence of standard terms for many object which are kept in the ethnographic museum.

Translated by Tanja Bukovčan