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Toward an Integrated Thesaurus of the Social Sciences*

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Introductory remarks concerning papers and deliberations of a meeting of the Unesco Division for the International Development of the Social Sciences, Paris, June 9–11, 1980, intended to pave the way toward an Integrated Thesaurus of the Social Sciences. Developmental steps toward clarification of SS terminology had been undertaken at Unesco already in 1952. Ever since then dictionary projects and attempts at concept identification have been undertaken, but the non-existence of an overall classification system of the SS identifying its scope and interrelationships has hampered the terminology work considerably. Proposals for valid methods were sought therefore in order that within 1981–1983 a macrothesaurus/classification system for the SS could be worked out possibly based on an integration of existing thesauri and classification systems in these fields. I.C.

1. Introduction

The Meeting of Consultants on the Incorporation of the Social Sciences into UNISIST which met at Unesco HQ in October 1973, and the Meeting of Experts at Valescure in 1974, plus several other Unesco meetings on social science information problems, all agreed that social scientists suffer a major handicap because the terminology giving access to socio-economic information, documentation and data has become confusing and ambiguous. Social scientists face an increasing proliferation of new subject fields and conceptual frameworks in many languages, schools of thought and disciplines all over the world. The number of retrieval and indexing languages, elaborated for specific social science fields, has grown rapidly, but there is no reliable classification scheme (or system) covering all the major areas of social knowledge.

2. Historical Background

Interest in the clarification of social science terminology dates back to 1952 when the 7th General Conference of UNESCO approved the preparation of unilingual social science dictionaries in the major languages of the world.

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Findings based on preliminary studies conducted by the Secretariat were presented in 1954 to an international meeting of experts composed of social scientists, linguists and lexicographers. Following their recommendation national working parties, particularly in Belgium, France, Great-Britain, Spain, Switzerland and the USA carried out pilot projects using the English, French and Spanish languages. The first results came ten years later in 1964: the standard-setting English *Dictionary of the Social Science* which Prof. Julius Gould, of the University of Nottingham, and Dean William L. Kolb of Beloit College compiled with the assistance of English and American teams of advisers and contributors. The provisional French *Dictionnaire des Sciences Sociales* remains unpublished. It was prepared by working groups under the direction of Messrs. R. Bastide and J. P. Trystam, with assistance from Unesco, the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section VI, and the CNRS (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique), but the intended revision was never finished.

With the English language dictionary as a model, the two-volume Spanish *Diccionario de ciencias sociales*, came out eleven years later, in 1975. It was compiled under the direction of an editorial committee headed by Prof. Salustiano del Campo of the Universidad de Madrid. Thus the project continued, twenty-eight years after the 7th General Conference. Other such dictionaries are still under preparation, notably the Arabic and the Portuguese dictionaries.

Mention should also be made of the modest support that Unesco gave to the OECD *Macrothesaurus*, through the International Committee for Social Science Information and Documentation (ICSSD) – an NGO, established in 1950 with Unesco support – that later appeared as a publication of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, entitled *Thesaurus for Information Processing in Sociology*. ICSSD also compiled, with Unesco support, the classification scheme used in its *International Bibliography of Social Sciences*. Finally, Unesco's Social Science Documentation Centre was involved in the preparations of the Broad System of Ordering, the SPINES Thesaurus, and the Unesco Thesaurus, all published in recent years.

Apart from this support for the development of discipline-oriented terminological tools, Unesco has contributed to overall improvements of social science terminology. At the Valescure meeting in 1974, there was general agreement that terminological problems are greater in the social than in the natural sciences. The meeting recommended that Unesco set up a working group on terminology in the social sciences with the participation of social scientists, information specialists and software experts. Furthermore, in para. 14 of its recommendations, the meeting suggested that "in parallel with work on the Broad System of Ordering, an assessment should be made of the applicability to various forms of social science information of the detailed subject analysis systems that may permit switching and linking between different classification schemes at a microlevel".

One of the most important tasks Unesco has recently undertaken, in order to cope with the terminological confusion in the social sciences and to facilitate efforts by specialists in various subject fields to identify the key

concepts required in their research and publication, was the Interconcept pilot project carried out between 1977–1979. Although the project's pilot stage was successful, providing numerous potentialities for the improvement of communication problems in the social sciences, some members of the Interconcept Ad-hoc Committee felt that one of the major obstacles for the further development of this project was the lack of an integrated classification scheme for the social science disciplines.

3. The Present Meeting

The core of the participants now attending this meeting comprises the specialists who served as members of the Interconcept Ad-hoc Committee. They have shown great interest in the improvement of social science terminology, as well as enthusiasm and initiative, demonstrating a high degree of professionalism and expertise in the development of the Interconcept project. Unesco greatly appreciates the services of the Ad-hoc Committee's members, nearly all of whom are present here: Prof. F. Riggs, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Dr. I. Dahlberg, Editor of *International Classification*, Mrs. M. Krommer-Benz, Programme Specialist of Infoterm, and Mr. P. Vászrhelyi, who during the project's implementation moved from his institute in Hungary to become a Unesco staff-member.

However, this does not mean that the present Consultative Meeting is a sort of continuation or diversification of the Interconcept project. On the contrary, the further progress of Interconcept depends on the success of the classification scheme project. I am pleased to say that in addition to the former Interconcept Ad-hoc Committee members, whom I have just mentioned, we have in our meeting such experienced and well known scientists on terminology as Mr. Jean Viet, Director of one of the French information services; Prof. Jean Meyriat Secretary-General of ICSSID; and Prof. Juan Sager, Head of the Department of European Studies and Modern Languages, University of Manchester, U.K., who has headed numerous terminological projects at both national and international levels.

Finally, I should like to say that we very much count on the advice of Miss M. Grawitz, Professor at the University of Paris, representing the International Social Science Council (ISSC) here, and from Mr. M. Palnicov, of the Vienna Centre, representing the ECSSID (European Cooperation in Social Science Information and Documentation) project. I am confident that in the hands of such a distinguished gathering the results will justify the effort.

4. Preparatory Work

Before I say what Unesco expects from this project, I will outline the activities undertaken by the Secretariat in preparation for this meeting.

(1) In October 1979 Unesco negotiated a contract for the preparation of a bibliography of dictionaries, thesauri, and vocabularies in the social sciences. This work was started for the Interconcept project and was completed and submitted to Unesco at the end of April, 1980. It contains some 350 entries and is now available for your comments.

(2) In April 1979 Unesco established a contract with ICSSID for the identification and study of various classification tools and documentary languages used in the social sciences. This work included the following stages:

a) Approach to international disciplinary bodies and groups affiliated to professional associations, NGO's, IGO's, etc., active in selected areas of the social sciences, to survey the classification tools they consider most authoritative and best adapted to the needs of their own fields of specialization;

b) Preparation of a general analysis of the structure and content of major classification tools used in the social sciences, including analysis of the subject coverage by these tools, a comparison of the subject hierarchies in different classification schemes, and an assessment of their inter-relations, overlaps and duplication.

c) Preparation of a report on this study with recommendations for the creation of an integrated international classification scheme (or a thesaurus) covering the major social science fields.

(3) A third contract was negotiated last April for the study of the applicability of BSO to the social sciences, in order to examine BSO from the point of view of its adequacy to serve as a basis for the establishment and progressive development of an integrated social science classification scheme.

(4) Finally, I should like to mention the activities of Working Group 3 of the ECSSID project, with which Unesco was connected, either through Prof. M. Meyriat or Mr. M. Palnicov. One of the activities of this Working Group has been a study on the compatibility of indexing and retrieval languages in the social sciences and, as a first step, a comparison of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC), the MISON Rubricator and the BSO, in order to establish conversion tables and recommendations concerning amendments or modifications of these systems. As foreseen in our agenda, the results of this Study will be reported.

5. Goals

The major point of my introduction is to outline the results which Unesco expects from this project, which is expected to be continued in the new Unesco Programme for 1981–1983.

As Dr. Dahlberg pointed out in her article "International Concept Documentation in the Social Sciences", May 1975, "... one of the major tasks of Unesco is to take care of the tools which are necessary for the control of knowledge and which are preliminary for any communication and survey on objects of investigation and human activity. . . There is a universal need for a reliable classification scheme of the social science knowledge, based on existing and widely used terminological tools (dictionaries, encyclopedia, vocabularies, thesauri, etc.) . . . Such a classification should define the scope of the social sciences by their general objects (subject groupings) and major activities". There are numerous works of other scientists formulating the same target. Thus our goal is to create a "classification scheme".

There are as many definitions of "classification" as there are writers on the subject, and I shall not try to give a new one. I will therefore, give the definition contained in the conclusions of the Elsinore Conference

(1964): "By classification is meant any method creating relations, generic, or other between individual semantic units, regardless of the degree of hierarchy contained in the systems and of whether those systems would be applied in connection with traditional or more or less mechanized methods of document searching". This definition, however, is not popular in the field. In general the term "classification" is used to designate the list of descriptors, the system vocabulary or lexicon. Many authors use the term "classification" only if the descriptors are arranged in classified order or if there is terminological control in indexing (if the descriptors strictly correspond to concepts), and if hierarchical relationships are indicated between the descriptors.

In all cases, however "classification" is subject and purpose-oriented. It results in mutually related groups of various orders within the universe concerned. But the universe of subjects is a chaotic whole. Its growth, like that of human society, is unpredictable and irregular. In the past, the organization of subjects on the basis of specialised disciplines was helpful. But due to increased communication facilities and greater interaction of intellectuals specialized in different subject fields, "interdisciplinary subjects" have emerged, which are posing more and more of a challenge to the traditional discipline-oriented classification systems.

6. Possible Solutions

The imperfection of existing classification tools in the social sciences constantly encourages the search for a new solution. At present – as it follows from literature on this subject – there are three basic views on the social sciences:

(1) to develop a new, standard universal and complete classification (or thesaurus) of the social sciences, which would overcome the inadequacies of the existing tools while incorporating all their positive features;

(2) to adopt one of the present classification tools as a basis, and to perfect it; and

(3) to combine (or make compatible with each other) the existing tools developed for particular social sciences and groups of areas.

In the first case, a universal classification must be "open", that is, allow inclusion of new bases (or classes) of divisions at all levels of the classification without limitation and the language of indexing must be adaptable to all possible inclusions. Moreover, such a classification must provide an opportunity for constant re-arrangement of the logical structure of interrelations, and for the integration of fresh elements.

The second approach was described in papers by many scientists on the theory of classification for example, in the article "Possibilities for a new Universal Decimal Classification" (J. Doc., vol. 27) in 1971 by Dr. I. Dahlberg. Her study on the BSO, made for Unesco, was another investigation based on this approach. We also thought that the classification scheme, developed by ICSSID, for the *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences* might possibly be regarded as a good starting point.

If these two approaches are considered as extremes, the third, based on a combination of the existing classification tools, is often put forward as a compromise. Such an approach might well serve our purposes as an

intermediate first-stage solution for the progressive construction of an overall international classification. Thus we might first use a thesaurus method to develop a general, "O"-level thesaurus using descriptors taken from national and international specialized thesauri.

In other words, the first version of such a thesaurus would not be overly specialized in any particular social science area but could be suitable for describing the activities engaged in by any social science institutions, NGO's, etc. We would need to keep the size of such a thesaurus relatively small, probably in one language, say English, and at a level of sophistication that would enable indexers and searchers who have not mastered the technical language of a particular discipline to use the thesaurus effectively. These are our thoughts, here at Unesco, concerning the possible lines of the development of a general social science thesaurus.

7. Project Implementation

As a result of this meeting, we plan to set up a working (or expert) group from 1981 to 1983 to monitor the development of the project. The scope of this group could be described as follows:

(1) For the purpose of interconnexion and co-operation between information systems and services in the social sciences, the Working Group should design and develop an integrated thesaurus (or "A General Indexing Language"):

- a) for all fields of social science knowledge;
- b) for use in manual and computerized systems to serve as:

- a tool for interconnecting information systems, services and centres using diverse (and often incompatible) indexing/retrieval languages;
- a tool for tagging subject-fields and subfields;
- a referral tool to identify and describe all kinds of existing information sources, centres and services.

Such a scheme should be simple, flexible and amenable to revision, easily updated and easily used in information systems applying various information technologies.

(2) The essential function of such a classification scheme should be to make possible the grouping of related subjects at different levels of generality. They could first be arranged in alphabetical order, let's say in English. But, on the whole, because of the need to keep the classification regularly updated, it should probably be structurally, rather than alphabetically, organized. In other words, a complete collection of the classification's subject fields could eventually be presented:

- a) under a classified arrangement, that is, in a systematic table with all social science fields, sub-fields, etc., arranged according to code numbers;
- b) under an associative arrangement, i.e. in the form of graphic sheets, with arrows indicating related terms, etc.;
- c) under an alphabetical arrangement, i.e. in the form of A/Z index or thesaurus comprising synonyms, related terms, etc.

(3) The project could have short- and long-term targets. Among its short-term goals we might identify the following;

- a) an analysis and description of the essential elements of the major existing international classification schemes that are widely used in different social science

areas (in the absence of international systems for some social science disciplines, a choice could be made among those that exist at the national level and are used by groups of countries). In other words, we may continue the work started by Prof. J. Meyriat, Dr. I. Dahlberg and Mrs. M. Krommer-Benz to integrate their findings and throw new light on existing documentary languages, subject to their construction and structural limitations, fields of application, methodology of utilization, grammar, the ways and means of their extension and language modification, etc.;

b) another perspective could be the compilation of a comparison and compatibility matrix for the major subject-field-oriented classification systems in the social sciences, with reference to their place and use in our integrated thesaurus;

c) major subject fields of the social sciences are now organized internationally, especially by research committees of the NGO's associated with the ISSC. They have not yet been encouraged to work on terminological

issues. However, in view of the growing demands for better terminology from social scientists and information specialists who are engaged in processing and disseminating social science knowledge it seems reasonable to expect that many of these research committees will want to cooperate with us in developing relevant sections of the integrated thesaurus. Thus, one of the short-term steps in our project could be some organisational and methodological arrangements between Unesco and these NGO's.

We should also seek methodological guidance and support from Infoterm, ISO, FID, ICSSD and other international bodies dealing with the improvement of social science terminology.

Unesco hopes that the present Consultative Meeting will formulate concrete recommendations and a strategy for this project, in order to help the Secretariat establish definite targets and priorities for the implementation of these tasks.



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