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Information and Code Biases:
Social Differentiation, Intersectionality and Decoloniality
in Knowledge Organization Systems

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Abstract: This study examines the historical perception of knowledge organization systems (KOS) as reinforcing oppressive regimes and epistemicides, particularly regarding issues such as race, gender, sexuality, and feminist studies. Drawing on the concepts of social differentiation, intersectionality, and decoloniality, it explores the complexities and challenges encountered in developing these systems within a context marked by the pervasive influence of technologies like artificial intelligence, semantic interoperability, alignment, and governance in emerging knowledge networks. Furthermore, it proposes an experimental process to operationalize intersectionality and decoloniality as pivotal dimensions in defining the structuring warranty employed in constructing KOS. This involves integrating these perspectives into the development processes while considering the interconnectedness among various forms of oppression and inequality and recognizing the imperative to decolonize knowledge and underlying power structures. Subsequently, the implementation stages of the COEXISTENCE – Thesaurus of Intersectionality and Decolonial Issues: Black Studies, Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies are outlined, followed by an analysis of the constraints and potentials of the experimental instrument devised and the approach adopted in its implementation.

1.0 Introduction

For Black Women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment (Lorde 2019, 58)

The belief in the presumed universalism that has historically underpinned knowledge organization systems (KOS) is now under intense scrutiny due to the unequivocal power and agency these systems exert in the processes of information and knowledge circulation in society.

Knowledge organization systems (KOS) are intermediary tools used in the representation and mediation of information. Their goal is to ensure the semantic and semiotic coherence of information entering circulation through technical procedures of knowledge organization. In this context, knowledge is established not only in relation to a

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field of statements but also in relation to objects, instruments, practices, research programs, skills, social networks, and institutions. Some elements of such an epistemic field reinforce and strengthen each other, being appropriated, extended, and reproduced in other contexts; others remain isolated from these emerging "strategies" or in conflict with them, eventually becoming forgotten curiosities. The configuration of knowledge requires that these heterogeneous elements be adequately adapted to one another and that their mutual alignment be sustained over time (Rouse 1994, 148).

The repeated absences and rarefied alterities in KOS, as noted by researchers in the field (Olson 2002; Mai 1999; Drumm 2000; Adler 2016; Trivelato and Moura 2016; 2017; Moura 2018, Anderson and Christen, 2019), emphasize the urgency of rethinking their status in light of the latent colonial narcissistic pact within them.

Throughout the history of the constitution of Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS), it is observable that these systems tend to engage with the operational dimension of social systems. From a functionalist perspective, they reiterate authority, regulatory norms, and organic solidarity in the formalization of consensus regarding the circulation of knowledge as an "underlying for the functioning of institutions." (Parsons, 1968,468). From this standpoint, they contribute to the discursive dimension of internalizing social values and norms.

There is a parallel complexity at the other end of the cybernetic hierarchy, involving action and, consequently, social systems. A society, or any other type of social system, has a pattern maintenance subsystem, whose units (once the system is sufficiently differentiated) have cultural primacy. These units of the social system then interpenetrate both the social community (and other social subsystems) and the cultural system itself. As differentiation progresses, they tend to become distinctly different depending on whether their primary concern is cultural or social (Parsons 1968, 467).

In this context, it is observed that the discourse oriented towards universality, underlying KOS, tends to conceal the political economy of knowledge production and its effects on the hierarchy of subjects, their worldviews, and epistemologies. The contemporary challenge has been to reflect on the epistemic and ontological foundations that inform such consensuses and cultural imperatives. What prevails? What is deliberately made rare? How are these colonial narcissistic pacts reiterated and encapsulated as culture within KOS?

This article seeks, first and foremost, to analyze the arguments concerning the colonial latency that still prevails in the arrangements of KOS and inhibits the circulation of counter-hegemonic knowledge, tactical information, and (re)existence of pluri-epistemic actions. To this end, the

emerging conceptual networks derived from studies and intersectional devices (collectives, social movements, among others) that elaborate pluri-epistemic knowledge, especially involving feminist studies and Black feminism, racial issues, and gender performativity, are analyzed. Subsequently, the article presents Coexistence - Thesaurus of Intersectionality and Decolonial Issues, an experimental KOS produced from a pluri-epistemic and intersectional perspective, which aims to provide a broad conceptual network associated with social studies and activism related to the themes of race, gender, sexuality, and feminist studies. In the proposed knowledge organization system, the goal is to build a pluriversal semantic/semiotic repertoire that can provide, from the standpoint of the device, "a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions."

2.0 Coloniality, social differentiation and intersectionality

The concept of social difference involves distinct cleavages around which inequality finds justifications and subterfuges. In the scope of her studies on race, Schwarcz (2012) recognizes the ambivalent nature of the concept of difference. The notion of difference reveals social hierarchies that tend to indicate the pragmatic conditions of social differentiation around the empirical and necessarily relational categories of race, gender, sex, age, color, and class.

According to Schwarcz (2012), these are continuous identities dependent on interpretative processes, which simultaneously require a break from the tendency to essentialize. Understanding the historical circumstances of the composition of social markers of difference is fundamental due to their relational role and theoretical guidance.

Fernandes (2008) also analyzes the effects of the presumed racial democracy, highlighting that the social stagnation to which black individuals were condemned did not actually threaten the power position of men. According to Fernandes, the myth of racial democracy did not establish itself suddenly but gradually embedded itself into the fabric and landscape of Brazilian society in the form of racial prejudice and discrimination.

The myth of racial democracy in Brazil consolidated the paralysis of black individuals in a class-based society, attributing this to an alleged incapacity within the realm of contingent social relations. Moreover, it absolved white individuals from the moral obligation of solidarity towards black individuals, a legacy from the long period of slavery. This pseudo-democracy framework strengthened a caste regime for the white segments of society, with obvious detriments to black individuals newly freed from slavery.

Saffioti (1978) highlighted the necessity of addressing gender issues to understand social inequality in Brazil. According to her, the mechanisms of women's exploitation

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within the context of capitalism provide arguments for considering the intersections of class, gender, and race.

The author shed light on the social class system that became more observable in Brazil after the abolition of slavery and identified interpretative distortions regarding the condition of women. It can be said that Saffioti initiated the combined discussion of the social markers of gender, race, and class in the reflection on social inequality. The author also examines the process that led to the abolition of slavery, highlighting the aspects of inequality even within the sociopolitical context that supported the end of slavery.

The abolitionist praxis was quite diverse, encompassing a range of behaviors, from adherence to emancipationist ideas, motivated by an understanding of the irreversibility of the process underway, to positions indicative of a richer and more integrated view of Brazilian socioeconomic formation within the international context. However, even the representatives of this latter position did not seem able to overcome a more or less immediate view of the conversion of black individuals into free citizens (Saffioti 1978, 81).

Engaging in less linear readings regarding the socio-historical construction of social differentiation can result in a more inclusive interpretive model. Particularly, when considering the intersectional paradigm, Collins (2000), cited in Hirano et al. (2019, 34), emphasizes the idea of a matrix of domination derived from unidirectional analyses of oppression.

The matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, domains of structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal power reappear through various forms of oppression (Hirano et al. 2019, 34).

The concept of intersectionality, proposed by Crenshaw in 1989 as an analytical metaphor, highlighted the universalist, sexist, and patriarchal nature of discussions within spheres advocating for women's rights. This metaphor was used in the context of articulating anti-racist activism and gender issues.

> As a metaphor, intersectionality names a continuous communicative process that seeks to understand race in terms of gender or gender in terms of class. Instead of following the chain of metaphors (race is like and unlike gender), the intersectionality metaphor provided a shortcut that drew on existing sensibilities to see connections. (Collins and Bilge 2022, 45)

Intersectionality refers to a transdisciplinary theory aimed at apprehending the complexity of identities and social inequalities through an integrated approach. It rejects the confinement and hierarchization of the major axes of social differentiation, which include categories such as sex/gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, disability, and sexual orientation.

The intersectional approach goes beyond simply recognizing the multiplicity of oppression systems operating through these categories and posits their interaction in the production and reproduction of social inequalities.

Regarding the adoption of intersectionality as an analytical tool, Collins and Bilge (2021) point out that in the 1990s, when the concept gained prominence and became an analytical category in various disciplines, it was possible to emphasize criticism "of existing bodies of knowledge, theory, epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies" in addressing social inequality.

Colonialism and its offshoots, such as capitalism and the coloniality of being, knowledge, power, and seeing, are recurrently confronted in the context of knowledge organization. Knowledge organization systems, developed within the framework of the coloniality of knowledge and epistemic injustice, tend, from a normative perspective, to perpetuate racial hierarchy, Eurocentrism, colonial epistemologies, global capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity as forms of knowledge. From this perspective, these values are often inscribed in the interstices of the norm, resulting in symbolic violence and systematic erasures.

The reflection on the repercussions of epistemicide (Carneiro, 2023) and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2023) in the circulation of knowledge, encapsulated within the recurring narratives of Caucasian modernity, has long been central to the concerns guiding the study of knowledge organization. This is particularly due to the erasure of specificities and agendas of certain social segments. Such a perspective directly influences the distribution of epistemic goods by systematically perpetuating epistemologies of ignorance and testimonial and hermeneutical injustice.

3.0 Enhancing alignment and governance in emerging knowledge networks: towards an Intersectional Thesaurus

Semantic interoperability has been presented, for some years now, as a technological solution for establishing semantic agreements in information systems. The main purpose is to leverage the structuring effort undertaken within a given context to extend it to others, thereby enhancing the quality and agility between semantic representations, reference terminologies (ad hoc terminologies), and interface terms (terms adopted by system users to mitigate interaction difficulties and keep reference terminologies up-to-date).

Semantic interoperability is considered the ability of information systems (languages, applications, platforms, databases) and institutions to share meanings and significance through the adoption of a consistent semantic base. From a technological standpoint, semantic interoperability has provided significant advancements by streamlining the processes of mapping and updating language through the adop-

tion of consistent meanings. Additionally, it has enhanced collaboration between institutions that share a common semantic base. In this regard, it is possible to adopt exact, inexact, and partial equivalence markers that facilitate more frequent collaborations.

As part of this effort, international organizations such as UNESCO have maintained interoperable terminological bases aimed at adequately addressing the contextual aspects of language. However, it is important to highlight that projects aimed at consolidating common semantic bases still encounter several issues, such as the loss of context, ambiguity and misalignment, cultural, social, and linguistic differences, and technical limitations.

From our perspective, the preservation of context and respect for cultural, social, and linguistic differences remain the issues that require the most attention in knowledge organization studies, particularly because the automation of procedures should not obliterate socio-historical differences.

Despite various efforts to guide the development of semantic schemes within the KOS by expanding warranties, it has been observed over the years to appease the expression of oppressions, since contradictions still remain subsumed in an apparent semantic/semiotic universalism.

The main risk of this action is the exhaustion of representation potential and the loss of the indexical character of reference terminologies, particularly those produced in emerging networks of epistemological pluralism. Emerging studies, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are heterogeneous and pose challenges for semantic interoperability. This is often due to the plurality of approaches involved in conducting studies and the instability in the adopted conceptual network stemming from the emancipatory, experimental, and speculative nature of these studies.

Currently, numerous conflicts related to linguistic vulnerability are observed in emerging studies related to gender performativity and raciality. To break away from the normative and static nature of sex and race categories, it is sometimes necessary to incorporate terms adopted in contexts confronting gender violence, reconceptualized in their political use, such as queer and decolonial feminism terms. The studies on black feminism, for example, are more frequent. However, due to the lack of clear recognition as an analytical category, they are still considered emerging. The complexity lies in their focus on the matrix of modern colonial oppression, which is manifold and simultaneous for black women. In this regard, these studies mobilize a multidisciplinary and dynamic set of terminology.

In recent years, there have been significant research efforts aimed at understanding the epistemic status of knowledge organization systems (KOS) and their potential agency. This is because the different warranties adopted or their unilateral use tend to overlook central aspects that ultimately interfere with the processes of production and circulation of specialized knowledge. Within the structure of KOS, structuring warranties are adopted and, as Beghtol states,

> [...] the authority a classificationist invokes first to justify and subsequently to verify decisions about what classes/concepts to include in the system, in what order classes/concepts should appear in the schedules, what units classes/concepts are divided into, how far subdivision should proceed, how much and where synthesis is available, whether citation orders are static or variable [...] The semantic warrant of a system thus provides the principal authorization for supposing that some class or concept or notational device will be helpful and meaningful to classifiers and ultimately to the users of documents [...]. (Beghtol 1986, 110-111)

However, the digital context, coupled with increased visibility of struggles for informational self-determination on a global scale and reflexivity among individuals, has made evident the partial nature and agency exerted by such instruments. In light of these findings, this article sought to incorporate the concept of intersectionality into the theoretical model that guided the design of an experimental thesaurus.

The intersectional perspective aimed to assist in understanding the articulated nature of oppression, demanding from the standpoint of information organization that we be capable of critically reflecting on social inequality, intersectional power relations, social context, relationality, social justice, and complexity.

In the last few years, a greater understanding of the effects of antagonisms present in knowledge organization instruments has led various social segments to undertake the task of monitoring these effects and taking collective responsibility for proposing adjustments to their structures. This action is based on methods of compiling and validating semantic repertoires from a dialogical perspective with the concerned community.

Since 1997, the Homosaurus Editorial Board has organized around this effort of adjustment and monitoring to consolidate a common semantic base that reflects the needs of the LGBTPQIAPN+ community. In this endeavor, making explicit the values guiding the consolidation of the instrument in the documentation has been fundamental, ensuring that the political bias inherent in this activity becomes increasingly evident.

> Self-Determination: We support all individuals in their right to define their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, ability, and other identities. By "right to define," we mean the right for a person or marginalized group to name themselves, and for that name to be used.

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Transparency: We recognize that openly sharing our practices, policies, and resources is part of our responsibility to the communities we represent.
Accessibility: We believe that vocabularies used to describe communities must be publicly and freely accessible to as many members of those communities as possible.
Community: We affirm that vocabularies must be built by and responsive to the people they describe and the people who use them.
Consent: We uphold a culture of consent and bodily autonomy in our term development and revision. (Homosaurus Editorial Board 2023, 3)

In the context of contemporary knowledge organization, it is crucial to acknowledge the active role of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI), particularly due to its reliance on unsupervised learning techniques. This approach presents several risks, including the generation of synthetic data, potential compromise of factual accuracy, lack of self-awareness, and disregard for ethical considerations. Therefore, it is imperative to closely monitor the implementation of Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS) driven by artificial intelligence. The inherent speed and mimetic nature of these systems can exacerbate existing biases in knowledge organization. Ethically, establishing "frameworks of reference" (Santaella 2023, 15) is essential for understanding the social implications and human consequences involved.

In the conception of COEXISTENCE - Thesaurus of Intersectionality, efforts were made to effectively implement an epistemological pluralism perspective at the structural level of the instrument, revealing the disparities of intersectional oppressions so as to consolidate a conceptual

network associated simultaneously with emerging research, social activism, and intellectual production on themes such as race, gender, sexuality, and feminist studies. Table 1 presents the Experimental Model of COEXISTENCE:

In the consolidation of the thesaurus, sources of information included specialized literature, national and international thesauri addressing the privileged themes, discourses, and agendas of social activism formalized in documents, speeches, and digital spaces. Additionally, efforts were made to structure a set of digital audiovisual collections that would vividly enhance understanding of the discourses expressed in the descriptors incorporated into the thesaurus.

To contemplate discourses, the conditions for the emergence of the regime of discursivity, as outlined by Foucault (2010), were taken as reference: surfaces of emergence – indicating the circumstances of emergence, individual differences, degrees of rationality, conceptual codes, and types of theory; instance of delimitation – referring to the identification of regulatory institutions within the domain responsible for distinguishing, designating, naming, and establishing processes of signification as objects; grids of specification – concerning the regimes of groupings and classifications adopted within a particular context of discursive formation. Based on understanding discursive formation regimes, efforts were made to articulate conceptual and operational perspectives of guiding concepts, enabling a comprehensive grasp of the diverse appropriations of the concept informing the descriptor.

The concepts of intersectionality, power, agency, and performativity served as the theoretical framework for the consolidation of the experimental thesaurus, comprising 1480 descriptors organized into 308 hierarchical relationships addressing themes of race, gender, sexuality, and femi-

COEXISTENCE –Thesaurus of intersectionality and decolonial issues				
	Theoretical model/ epistemological perspective	Topics covered	Framework	Information sources
	intersectionality	Race	English language	specialized literature
	Projective agency	Gender	Software /free	emerging research
	Reflexivity	Sexuality	interoperable	social activism
	Performativity	Feminist studies	Audiovisual collection	national and international thesauruses dealing with the favoured themes
	Epistemic pluralism		Dynamical	discourses and agendas of social activism formalised in documents, digital spaces and audiovisual collections
	epistemic justice		Collaborative	

Table 1: Experimental Model

Source: Research data

nist studies. The decision was made to make the thesaurus available through open-source software (TemaTres 3.2) and initially in English, aiming to broaden the possibilities for dialogue and dissemination of the proposed instrument.

4.0 The conceptual network of the thesaurus

The interdisciplinary conceptual network of this thesaurus was developed through a systematic identification and extraction of terms and concepts drawn from related thesauri, specialized literature, and semantic networks connected to research and activism contexts. Each term was selected based on its relevance to the identified thematic axes, taking into account both the contributions of academic research and production on these topics and their social usage as expressed in activism practices. This dual focus ensured that the conceptual network reflects both theoretical rigor and the lived realities of social movements.

In establishing relationships among terms, we followed established patterns common to thesauri, prioritizing hierarchical, associative, and equivalence relationships to organize meanings effectively. Nonetheless, due to the polyhierarchical nature of this instrument – guided by an intersectional framework – terms such as "oppression" could form associative links with concepts like "racism" and "sexism." This approach recognizes the interconnected nature of social injustices and allows for flexible, context-sensitive navigation within the network.

The creation of thematic categories and domains aimed to retain a functional and structural view of language, while also allowing for the development of categories that accommodate new associations as shaped by the theoretical-methodological lens of the experiment. Such flexibility facilitates the integration of complex social phenomena within the thesaurus, enriching its descriptive and organizational capacity.

Criteria for term selection and hierarchy incorporated an intersectional lens that emphasizes terminological inclusion, grounded in the historical, cultural, and linguistic determinants of the discourse object. This approach draws on Foucault's analytical categories of *surface of emergence*, *delimitation instance*, and *grids of specification*, allowing us to critically assess how knowledge production is shaped by broader sociocultural dynamics. Furthermore, this approach foregrounds the performative nature of language and highlights the potential risks posed by historically imposed, patriarchal, sexist, racist, and epistemicide structures. The cultural, social, and political relevance of terms was thus recognized as essential for giving presence to phenomena and for representing them through the indexed terms.

5.0 Conclusion

The study undertaken provided an opportunity to understand the historical connections inherent in the composition of social markers of difference in Brazil and their implications as discourse in the production, organization, and dissemination of knowledge. By highlighting the intersectional and dynamic nature of oppression and its interfaces with power, it was possible to conceive a theoretical model for understanding the structuring of knowledge organization systems (KOS).

The proposed experimental model took into account the dynamism of contemporary forms of knowledge dissemination, the historical and interconnected nature of oppressions, and the enhancement of epistemic pluralism to ensure distributive justice concerning epistemic goods from the perspectives of testimonial and hermeneutic justice.

The knowledge organization system resulting from this process functions as a knowledge device guided by genealogical analysis of discursive formation systems and their objects, focusing on types of enunciation, concepts, theoretical choices, and bundles of relations. The experimental and progressive nature of the thesaurus produced reveals risks inherent in the epistemologization of positivity, disciplinary mechanisms, and specific regularities within knowledge. In this sense, it calls for a genealogical and intersectional effort to understand the micro-practices that may foster the emancipation of historical knowledge, while remaining aware of the heterogeneity of alignments around power relations, necessarily involving agents, power instruments, practices, and rituals – a way to reposition both knowledge and subjugated subjects.

Acknowledgments

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