Book Reviews

Edited by Michèle Hudon

Book Review Editor

AITCHISON, Jean; GILCHRIST, Alan; and BAWDEN, David. **Thesaurus construction and use: a practical manual.** 3rd ed. London : ASLIB, 1997. xvi, 212p. ISBN 0-85142-390-6 (Pbk).

The use of thesauri in information retrieval has had a phenomenal rise since the dawn of computer-assisted information retrieval. Therefore, the thesaurus has justifiably been called a "machine language". Though inherently a tool for classification in every sense of the term, its popularity and growth sent the custodians and exponents of traditional "classification for shelf arrangement" into a panic. Computer enthusiasts even suggested the potential irrelevance of classification studies, while conveniently forgetting that all thesauri essentially employ classificatory principles. In fact, a thesaurus has a greater number of systematic features than traditional mark and park classification systems. Today's classification studies have staged a come back with a rejuvenated vigour, thanks to Karen Markey Drabenstott, Pauline Cochrane, and Nancy Williamson, to name only a few, for their research in online uses of classification, and thanks to the unswerving faith in the abiding value of classification of stalwarts like D.J. Foskett and Eric J. Coates. Ironically, contemporary thesauri find themselves in much the same situation in the era of full text retrieval and smart search engines. The prophets of doom's proclamations of the death of thesauri are as false as were the earlier fears of the obsolescence of classification in the early days of automated libraries. The fact remains that these classifications and thesauri are not only complementary to one another but, jointly with Boolean operators, can perform very sophisticated searches not hitherto possible. We have witnessed the emergence of many kinds of thesauri with fascinating names such as metathesaurus, microthesaurus, end-user thesaurus, thesaurofacet, monolingual and multilingual thesauri. In the meantime, standards for thesauri both at the national level (such as BS 5723, BS 6723, ANSI/NISO Z39.19:1993) and international level (ISO 2788, ISO 5964) have evolved, signalling the maturity of the thesaurus. References to these standards are interspersed throughout the text under review; their popularity is obvious from a lengthy and useful but select bibliography (p. 187-197) in this book.

Since its first publication in 1972, the Aitchison and Gilchrist manual has remained a lighthouse for the planning and design of thesauri, both monolingual and multilingual. Its three editions fully document the progress of the science of thesaurus-making, and the course it has charted since its birth. For all these years, the manual has kept itself up to date, relevant, and has maintained a convincing leadership in the field. The book sets its own standards in thesaurus design with clarity and with an easy to follow presentation. This is an A/Z manual on thesaurus studies and construction. It is peerless in its lucidity and varied illustrations and diagrams. Examples from currently used thesauri are plentiful. It is thus useful both for manual and automated methods and procedures. A list of thesaurus-making software is made available on the Internet by the American Society of Indexers (ASI) at:
http://www.asi.org/thessoft.htm; and comparative studies of thesauri are available at:
http://www.willpower.demon.co.uk/thestable.htm.

The manual covers issues ranging from the needs for and the purpose of thesaurus to its step by step construction. The thesaurus is not seen in isolation, but rather in a broader perspective, that of information retrieval. Related issues are also discussed: the what, the why and the how of vocabulary control, levels of specificity, compound terms, structures of relationships and display, multilingual thesauri, thesaurus maintenance and management, thesaurus reconciliation and mergers. An appendix provides the rules for use of compound terms that have been adopted in the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus.*

The core of the book has been divided into 12 chapters, marked A/L. Each section has further been split into numbered divisions with feature headings. This type of presentation enhances the reference value of the book. The very detailed and professionally compiled index is a model of excellence; the loca-

https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-1999-2-103 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

tors are section and subdivision numbers rather than page numbers. But because section and subdivision numbers are not printed at the top of each page, the reader may waste time in trying to locate the needed information in the text. This minor flaw in the presentation will hopefully be corrected in a next edition. One would also expect to find from this textbook a separate glossary of important terms, with clear definitions.

The book in A4 size, with its convenient typographical design and attractive get up is easy to handle and use. With very few exceptions (e.g. on page 188, item 2, 1970s is printed as 1980s), it is free of misprints and typographical blunders.

As were the previous ones, this third edition of the Aitchison and Gilchrist book is appropriate as a self learning manual to craft a thesaurus and to understand its theoretical underpinnings and varied uses. This third edition deserves to reign supreme in the field, as did the earlier two. This reviewer hopes to see more editions in the 21st century, as thesauri will remain relevant in information retrieval in the near future.

M.P. Satija

M P Satija, GND University, Amritsar - 143 005, India, e-mail: dcse_gndu@yahoo.com

ABBOTT, Robert. **The world as information : overload and personal design**. Exeter: Intellect, 1999. 155 p. ISBN 1-871516-75-7

The world as information is a polemical observation on information overload, particularly in the world of technologically transferred information, as it has affected and continues to affect the individual. Abbott's narrative relies on his fascination with and adulation for the author Thomas Wolfe, an individual who wanted to "know" everything, but lacked the organizational capacity and wherewithal to do so. Wolfe wanted a perfect list of all the things he had seen in his life and all the places he had been, much like "trainspotters" (a British allusion which Abbott, from England, uses throughout the book). To propose a solution of sorts, Abbott relies on Karl Popper's "Three Worlds" as a first effort to conceive of, organize, and explain the world of information. He then adds his own observations on recent efforts to create a further, "fourth world," that may or may not resolve the crisis of overload. As I will point out, while Abbott's premiss regarding the difficulty of organizing so much information is valid — i.e. there really is too much to understand — his reliance on the neo-utopian sanctity and "responsibility" of the individual to create his or her own information world can only prolong the confusion.

Popper's "worlds" include World 1, the physical world without meaning, things as they are, such as rocks, mountains, electricity; World 2, individual thought and experience, as in what is in the mind rather than the brain; and World 3, information that has been engineered, recorded, and manipulated in order to be transferred to others. Worlds 1 and 2 feed into each other as meaning is created (to become the World 2 realm of ideas), while World 3 is the world of writing, recording, libraries and databases.

As it is, Popper has created a straightforward enough epistemology, except that it does not take into account the degree to which we rely on others for our own ideas – to the extent they can be called our own – or how we negotiate meaning as members of groups. Therein lies Abbott's own problem and the greatest problem faced by the information society: the fact that we are a society and not a group of individual minds connected by databases and other World 3 apparatuses.

In the end, Abbott cites efforts to bring into play the "world brain" (e.g. Bacon, the encyclopaedists, and more recently the Xanadu project, the WWW and the Internet) and the responsibility of individuals to organize their own "fourth world"; but there can be no true "world brain" without global co-operation, equity, holistic governance, interoperability, and a society-wide construction, shaping, and negotiation of technology. What kind of world brain – or more pointedly, society – can there be if, as Abbott ironically suggests, some of us must "also care for and accommodate those, perhaps the majority, who do not want to, or cannot, play its most intensive games, whether *driven* [my emphasis] by politics, economics, technology...". Whose brain belongs to whom under such deterministic conditions? And why not negotiate a society in which "perhaps the majority" would and could want to play?

Compounding the problem of the inability to participate is so-called free-market competition in the selling of information as a commodity. There will be many people who never get past Popper's World 2, who will never even know that information, if they know what that is, can be organized and shared and understood and used to benefit everyone. Abbott's sterile overly structured bewilderment at the supposed potential for everyone to know everything, or at least know how to find and understand all information, won't get us very far into the fourth world. It is only on the last page of the book that Abbott acknowledges with any seriousness that we may need

https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-1999-2-103 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY