The Ethnographic Thesaurus: A Controlled Vocabulary for Folklore, Ethnomusicology, and Related Fields

Catherine Heibert Kerst
Folklife Specialist, cker@loc.gov

The Ethnographic Thesaurus is a cooperative project of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and the American Folklife Society. It is a comprehensive, controlled, hierarchical listing of subject terms created for use in the description of ethnographic research and collections. For decades, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, cultural anthropologists, ethnologists, and archivists in cultural research institutions have considered developing a structured vocabulary for subject terms in our respective fields. With the creation of the Ethnographic Thesaurus, this wish is becoming a reality.

What is a thesaurus?
A thesaurus is a hierarchical listing of words and phrases that is drawn from a specialized vocabulary, and that shows the relationships between and among terms, as in this example:

- legends

  *Scope note*: Narratives with some degree of plausibility, which often include varying perspectives on truth, belief, and doubt about the narrated events.
  *Use for*: belief stories
  *Broader term*: narratives
  *Narrower term*: historical legends
  *Related term*: rumors

A thesaurus is not a dictionary with definitions, though it may have scope notes that specify the parameters for the use of a chosen subject term. Nor is it a synonym dictionary with mere equivalences. The Ethnographic Thesaurus is, accordingly, a gathering of terms of relevance to the field of ethnography and ethnology, organized hierarchically in clusters to encompass a wide range of cultural subject areas.

Scope of the Ethnographic Thesaurus
The Ethnographic Thesaurus comprises subject terms from disciplines that use ethnographic methodology and that reflect the systematic description of traditional and creative expressive culture, often documented through participant observation and fieldwork. As ethnography entails the study of human culture in all of its many dimensions, so the Ethnographic Thesaurus reflects the approaches, disciplines, and topics of this domain—kinship, occupation, festival, magic, dance, and ritual, to bodily adornment, foodways, crafts, education, and more. The Ethnographic Thesaurus serves the fields of folklore, ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, oral history, ethnology, cultural geography, cultural linguistics, and other human and social sciences that seek to describe cultural research and its methods.

Prior to this recent work, there was no English-language standard for the description and classification of cultural materials in thesaurus form. Those fields of study that do not have a shared systematic vocabulary are at a great disadvantage, especially in the current online networked environment where communication, useful descriptive metadata, and effective access to cultural materials is of the utmost importance. It is our aim to be in the forefront of this effort through the creation of the Ethnographic Thesaurus. There are, of course, valuable thesauri in related fields, such as The J. Paul Getty Trust’s *Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)* and the *Thesaurus for Graphic Materials (TGM 1)* developed by the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, both intended for the description, indexing, and cataloging of the visual arts and architecture. The Ethnographic Thesaurus has benefitted from both the vocabularies and hierarchies in these two resources.
Development of the Ethnographic Thesaurus

In 2003, the American Folklore Society, in partnership with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, received funding from the Scholarly Communications Program of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to develop the Ethnographic Thesaurus. For the project, which began in 2004, the Mellon Foundation grant supported four part-time staff members, who worked in concert with an advisory committee, chosen from the fields of folklore, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology—each contributing distinctive and differing perspectives and expertise in archival and library work. Since the completion of the grant, Michael Taft, Catherine Hiebert Kerst, and Margaret Kruesi, all staff members of the American Folklife Center, have served as the Ethnographic Thesaurus Advisory Board to review and complete the current beta version of the thesaurus.

Language and Culture of the Ethnographic Thesaurus

The principal language of the Ethnographic Thesaurus is English in North American form and usage, although it includes colloquialisms and non-English words when they are in common English usage. Given its American board of advisors and editors, the Ethnographic Thesaurus is, of necessity, ethnocentric in its approach to ethnography. Undoubtedly, a thesaurus team from another culture and/or language group would create terms and relationships that correspond with their worldview, and the resulting thesaurus would be quite different from the present one. For example, the Ethnographic Thesaurus considers ghosts to be supernatural beings; in a culture where ghosts are believed to be a part of the natural world, the subject term “ghosts” would have entirely different relationships within the thesaurus hierarchy.

Subject Areas in the Ethnographic Thesaurus

The Ethnographic Thesaurus is comprised of twenty-five “facets.” A facet is a cluster of terms that shares a principal subject focus. Each cluster forms a hierarchy of subject terms, from the broadest term (the “top term”) to the very narrowest of concepts. Therefore, the term “tales,” as found in the Literature Facet, will have narrower terms such as “animal tales,” “numbskull tales,” “Märchen,” or “trickster tales” included in its hierarchy.

The twenty-five facets are: General; Belief; Ritual; Health; Migration and Settlement Patterns; Human Dynamics; Law and Governance; Education; Entertainment; 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.

As the editors expand and fine-tune the Ethnographic Thesaurus, they draw upon vocabulary from a sample of ethnographic and cultural source materials, including documents, existing index vocabularies, expert knowledge, and academic papers.

Uses for the Ethnographic Thesaurus

Most ethnographic archives have subject classification schemes in place that have been created pragmatically over the years. These schemes may be useful within each specific archive, but they create a series of idiosyncratic “shoe-box classification systems” and are limited to the range and orientation of the collection on which they are based. The Ethnographic Thesaurus functions to standardize these classification schemes for more systematic indexing and cataloging purposes, so that ethnographic archives will “speak the same language” in describing their collections, allowing the possibility of union lists and other cross-institutional classification systems that pull together ethnographic information from a variety of sources.

A tool such as the Ethnographic Thesaurus will also help to identify and classify cultural materials in small institutions, such as local historical societies or regional archives, where there may be little or no cataloging of ethnographic materials. Librarians who are comfortable in describing published materials are often less familiar with multi-media ethnographic collections. The Ethnographic Thesaurus will allow them to navigate more easily through the description of such materials in order to provide appropriate access points for cataloging and indexing.

In addition, the Ethnographic Thesaurus will provide a source of agreed-upon subject terms that ethnographers can use in the field and for research publications. It is hoped that cultural researchers involved in field documentation will consult the Ethnographic Thesaurus when writing field notes or
articles, labeling their collected materials, and creating searchable databases in order to standardize vocabulary in the research community.

Further, the Ethnographic Thesaurus provides a standardized vocabulary for communication within cultural disciplines and across international boundaries. As such, it offers a common source for index terms for books, published abstracts, conference papers, digitization projects, and web searching.

Finally, with digitization, the importance of making subject material searchable and accessible to users is more important than ever. The Ethnographic Thesaurus offers lexicographical support to provide consistency in content standards for digital archive projects featuring sound and visual materials and metadata.

Once completed, the Ethnographic Thesaurus will be available online to the public free of charge, where anyone can browse its facets and download them. Parts of the thesaurus, for example, could be reproduced and linked to images and sound clips to create online cultural glossaries. Or, users might copy a facet or sub-facet from the Ethnographic Thesaurus to expand a particular topic for their own purposes. For instance, a museum with collections of traditional occupational clothing might extract a subset of the Clothing portion of the Material Culture facet in order to develop, in further detail, a classification scheme corresponding to their collections. This last possibility is one of the most exciting aspects of the Ethnographic Thesaurus project—that over time, the community of users will expand the scope or extend the detail of the Ethnographic Thesaurus to cover the ethnographic world more completely.

Conclusion

The Ethnographic Thesaurus is a web-based resource that will soon be available on the Open Folklore Portal of the American Folklore Society, hosted at Indiana University at: http://www.openfolklore.org/ At the same time, because a thesaurus describes a living language that, like all natural languages, changes to reflect current concepts and usage while providing standards and a stable structure, there will never be a “final” form for the Ethnographic Thesaurus. To remain vital, the Ethnographic Thesaurus will need to be maintained and updated regularly to allow for new terms, as well as appropriate changes to existing thesaurus terms.

If you are interested in communicating with the Ethnographic Thesaurus Advisory Board, please contact Catherine Hiebert Kerst at: cker@loc.gov.

This article is condensed from an earlier version, which was published as: The Ethnographic Thesaurus: Creation and Development of an Archival Tool in *LASA Journal*, no. 27, July 2006, pp. 25-31.