The Astronomy Thesaurus and UDC – Present and Future (Group Discussion for Users and Potential Users)

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Abstract. A brief discussion of the potential and problems of the Astronomy Thesaurus and UDC classification system took place. Once again, no resolution to the questions of updating and revising these items was found.

1. Astronomy Thesaurus

1.1. Background

Please note that the comments below comprise my own thoughts and are not necessarily shared or endorsed by the primary authors of The Astronomy Thesaurus, Robyn and Robert Shobbrook.

A thesaurus, in this context, is a collection of terms showing a hierarchical structure of those terms and prescribing which term among possible synonyms should be used. It is intended for use with electronic indexes. The introduction to the thesaurus explains its use and construction in detail (Shobbrook & Shobbrook 1993a). The Astronomy Thesaurus was compiled by a team of librarians and astronomers under the auspices of the International Astronomical Union.

If you do not have access to a hard copy take a look at the Web version of the Astronomy Thesaurus (Shobbrook & Shobbrook 1993b). There you will find almost all of the functions of the thesaurus. You will find the preferred term, if you happen to have searched for one of its synonyms. You will also see the broader and narrower terms. And you will be able to find a translation of the English term in four other languages. But you cannot see the hierarchy more than one level up or down at a time. Only the hardcopy displays the full hierarchy.

Among the purposes that I envisaged for the thesaurus while working on it were: cataloguing of books by librarians; indexing of articles by authors in journals and editors in indexes; and searching for those materials by astronomers. Widespread use of a uniform terminology would make transferring search strategies among various astronomy databases, whether they be journal indexes or library catalogues, much easier. The prevalence of Library of Congress (LC) derived cataloguing in many North American libraries works against this goal. Even small specialized astronomy and astrophysical libraries use LC subject headings in their catalogues. Furthermore, the journal editors continue to use their much simpler and shorter lists of keywords.

Before spearheading a campaign to update the thesaurus, I wanted to know how widely it is used and will be used. Specifically, I wanted to know how many people use the thesaurus as a thesaurus proper, not just a translation dictionary.

1.2.   Summary of Discussion

A sprinkling of people indicated that they did use the thesaurus. Discussion ensued about the use or rather non-use of the thesaurus by the editors of the core astronomy journals. Of course, authors won't use it unless directed to by the editors. Nor is there any point to an indexing service such as the ADS (Astrophysics Data Service) trying to include it – their indexing is provided by the journals.

I related how, although I have approached some journal editors, so far they have not shown any interest in using it. It was suggested that editors require a different level of specificity of terms for journal articles than do librarians cataloguing books. One can argue, however, that these different needs are accomodated in the thesaurus by the presence of a full hierarchy of terms – broad ones and very specific ones.

Perhaps it is inertia or an incomplete understanding of the usefulness of the thesaurus that has prevented its widespread adoption.

1.3.   Conclusion

It appears that unless a critical mass of journal editors take up the thesaurus as an important tool, it will languish. Further exploration of its use by the journals will be pursued before any major updating project is undertaken.

2.   UDC classification scheme – Astronomy

2.1.   Background

The UDC (Universal Decimal Classification) is, in some ways, a similar tool to the Astronomy Thesaurus and has similar problems in terms of need for revision and limited use. Many libraries use the LC classification system. For some background on UDC see Wilkins (1998) and Dorokhova (1998).

The questions to be discussed were whether there are enough users of UDC to justify revising it, who will do the revision and how.

2.2.   Summary of Discussion

A sprinkling of hands was raised in answer to the question of who uses UDC and those people were invited to form a separate discussion group. This small group raised problems such as the apparent unwillingness of the UDC consortium to add new classes and the difficulty connected with national variations (e.g. the version prescribed for use in Finland). A wish for more details about the discussions that have taken place with the consortium was expressed.

2.3.   Conclusion

The group suggested that a short questionaire be distributed on the ASTROLIB mailing list to determine how widespread use of UDC is.

References

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