
The BackBone Thesaurus – evolving a meta-thesaurus for the humanities through collaborative, distributed thesauri maintenance and development

Abstract

The goal of this presentation is to showcase the development and collaborative management of the BackBone Thesaurus (BBT)[1] –an overarching thesaurus for the Humanities, under which specialist thesauri and structured vocabularies used across scholarly communities in the humanities can be aligned –along with the online tool that enables users navigate through the hierarchies of BBT, connect thesauri to it, as well as propose to modify the structure of the meta-thesaurus upon expanding its scope; namely the BBT Submission and Connection Management Tool (BBTalk).[2]

The BBT is the research outcome of work undertaken by the DARIAH Thesaurus Maintenance Working Group (TMWG); it is a faceted classification drawing on a small set of top-level concepts (facets and hierarchies) that are inductively obtained through a bottom-up analysis of vocabularies used in the fields of History, Archaeology, Ethnology, Philosophy of Sciences, Anthropology, Linguistics, Theatre Studies, Musicology and History of Art (Daskalaki & Charami 2017).

Taken together, the facets of BBT offer an open set of general classes that aim to broadly cover the domain of the humanities, while being clearly demarcated and completely disjoint from one another (TMWG 2015). The faceted classification technique is considered valid and reusable from a cross-disciplinary perspective. By providing an iterative and principled means to generate facets, this technique offers the major advantage of supporting open expansion of BBT into new areas of research in a sustainable and manageable fashion. Rather than limiting the basic set of terms, the basic terms are left in principle open to expansion and redefinition based on new input concepts.

In line with practices followed in thesaurus building, the concepts used in the BBT, as well as their relations, become salient through the definition of their scope notes –i.e. the properties singling them out from other concepts of the same level –plus the context they are found in – i.e. their position in the overall structure (Doerr & Kalomoirakis 2000, Svenonius 2003). BBT only permits inclusion relations among its facets and hierarchies.

BBTalk is an online service developed to manage the function of integrating specialist thesauri with the meta-thesaurus, a process by means of which the top-level classification is corroborated or disconfirmed. If the latter, BBTalk allows users to propose changes to the BBT itself –submissions for changes involve the introduction of new high-level terms (corresponding to facets and hierarchies), plus the deletion, merging or splitting of existing ones.

These change submissions are then discussed among the various groups using BBT – its curators and specialist thesauri maintainers – until consensus is reached. In this context, the

search for consensus revolves around the notion of user needs, defined by the relative match of local thesauri terminology clashes with the high-level classification proposed by the BBT. To support the process of consensus creation, a set of methodologically sound principles pertaining not only to thesaurus building, but also involved in the cognitive process of category building is invoked (Murphy 2002).

Furthermore, BBTalk allows users to browse through the facets and hierarchies of the meta-thesaurus and the list of terms from specialist thesauri that have been connected to it. Taken together, the functionalities of BBTalk allow it to work as a general maintenance system for the BBT (Georgis et al. 2019).

In the course of this presentation we will try to illustrate the processes and principles mentioned above by means of going through all the stages of thesaurus integration, in a stepwise fashion.

<https://www.backbonethesaurus.eu/>

www.backbonethesaurus.eu/BBTalk

REFERENCES

Daskalaki M. & Charami L. (2017). *A Back Bone Thesaurus for Digital Humanities*, ERCIM News 111, October 2017, Special theme: Digital Humanities , ERCIM News 111, October 2017 URL

Doerr M., & Kalomoirakis D. (2000). A Metastructure for Thesauri in Archaeology. Ljubljana, Slovenia, 18-21 April. BAR International Series 931, Archaeopress, Oxford, 117-126.

Georgis Ch., Bruseker G., & Tsouloucha E. (2019). *BBTalk: An Online Service for Collaborative and Transparent Thesaurus Curation*, ERCIM News 116, January 2018, Special theme: Transparency in Algorithmic Decision Making , ERCIM News 116, January 2018, URL

Murphy G. (2002). *The big book of concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Svenonius E. (2003). "Design of Controlled Vocabularies", in: *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, DOI:10.1081/E-ELIS 120009038, New York, 822-838.

Thesaurus Maintenance Working Group, VCC3, DARIAH EU. (2015). *Thesaurus Maintenance Methodological Outline*. Greece. Retrieved from <http://www.backbonethesaurus.eu/sites/default/files/workin>

Keywords: thesaurus building, thesaurus management, thesaurus integration