

A uniquely Australian thesaurus

Increasingly Australian film, television, advertising and literature are importing transatlantic terminology and concepts. An American bias appears to be supplanting the unique nature of the Australian culture and idiom. In Australian libraries cataloguers will be familiar with the difficulty of trying to adapt an American-based thesaurus to Australian concepts and lifestyles. A small market like ours has been reluctantly forced to adopt overseas standards because it is not cost-effective to develop independent tools that allow for the expression of Australian identity¹.

The need for a thesaurus of indexing terms reflecting Australian terminology may seem obvious. Prior to the year 2000, however, there was no such distinctly Australian thesaurus to call on, apart from the very general APAIS thesaurus. Since 2001 a unique solution has been steadily winning converts.

The Australian Pictorial Thesaurus (APT) is an online hierarchical thesaurus of specifically Australian subject terms, intended for use in the indexing of images and other original material collections in Australian libraries, archives and museums. It consists of an authoritative, controlled vocabulary, compiled and maintained on established principles of thesaurus construction.

The APT uses contemporary Australian words and phrases to describe objects, people, places, activities and concepts. The range and depth of APT terms facilitate the precise indexing of images and collections. By using APT subject terms in their databases, institutions will ensure more accurate retrieval across national collections.

Of course, any attempt to develop and maintain a uniquely Australian 'antidote' to transatlantic-language thesauri required

an extensive funding commitment. CASL committed to the project in 2000 and made funding available. A further boost for the project was the existence at the State Library of New South Wales of an Australian-focused topic thesaurus within its PICMAN database, from which the APT could evolve.

PICMAN, short for pictures and manuscripts, was established in 1992 as a database for recording and cataloguing the State Library's original materials acquisitions, replacing the Reading Room card catalogues. Today the database is online at <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/picman/>.

PICMAN's subject thesaurus originated in 1986 as a working tool for indexing over 200 000 historic photographs on videodiscs for the NSW Government Printing Office (GPO) Bicentennial Archives Project. The thesaurus was initially constructed by well-known indexer Alan Walker. In 1989, the collection and thesaurus were transferred to the State Library. The Library adopted the thesaurus for indexing its own videodisc projects, and loaded it into PICMAN, where it was known as the PICMAN Topic Thesaurus index.

The PTT was highly regarded by other institutions and became the basis for the APT, following extensive testing of the thesaurus on a wider range of collections at institutions other than the State Library of NSW, development work on its structure, selection of a thesaurus management software package and the development of a management strategy

for its ongoing maintenance and funding. Advances in web technology and modern telecommunications at the same time aided in the development of the project and in the selection of a suitable business model.

The APT was launched in January 2001 and has emerged as a national standard for image description. A free service hosted on the website of the State Library, the APT can be viewed at: <http://www.picturethesaurus.gov.au>. There are currently over 900 registered users of the APT and over 15 000 terms to choose from. Users can suggest new terms online if they want something added.

The beauty of the APT is it is uniquely Australian and caters to cataloguers of distinctly Australian scenes and culture. The APT is the thesaurus recommended by Picture Australia, and is also used by Picture Queensland, the State Library of Victoria, Film Australia and the Northern Territory Library and Information Service. Please visit the website for more information. Comments/feedback are welcome, e-mail the APT co-ordinator at apt@sl.nsw.gov.au.

¹When is a forest fire a bushfire? Towards an Australian pictorial thesaurus. Deb Stumm. 1999. <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/staff/dstumm/>.

ALIA elections for director and vice-president (president-elect)

Voting papers were distributed with the March issue of *inCite* for election by the membership at large (with a special mailout to the institutional member representatives) of one director and the vice-president (president-elect). Additional voting papers were sent to those with joint membership.

Separate voting papers will be forwarded to the National Policy Congress representatives for election of one director.

Voting closes: 5:00pm AEST Monday 11 April.

Candidates for director are Rachael Browning, Philip Keane and Ann Ritchie; and for vice-president (president-elect) Kevin Dudeney and Dagmar Schmidmaier. ■

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