

Comment on Hjørland's Concept Theory

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I agree with most of what Hjørland (2009) has to say, but would suggest that a quite different conclusion can be drawn from his arguments. I focus on three areas of disagreement.

1. The goals of scholarly research. I agree with Hjørland that we should evaluate concepts in terms of the goals of scholarly research. I would suggest that the over-riding goal of scholarly research is to enhance human understanding. Some scholars doubt that this is possible. If so, then scholarship – even in information science – may be just word play: we have no good reason for choosing one point of view over another. Most scholars hold to a more nuanced view: scholarship is riddled with errors and biases but we nevertheless have imperfect standards by which we can evaluate contributions.

Hjørland takes as given that scholars may have quite different motives: they may in particular wish to advance particular political agendas. However, we speak of 'information science' and 'knowledge organization systems' rather than 'ideologically-driven opinion science' and 'convenient argument organization systems' for reasons beyond the simplicity of the former expressions. Classifying understandings grounded in sound scholarship might actually help us build a better world. Information scientists should not wink at the baser motives that influence scholarship but classify research outcomes in a manner that best reflects the motives that scholars *should* pursue.

Any belief in the possibility of advances in understanding must be grounded in a hope that a reasoned scholarly conversation can from time to time yield a consensus view that is based on careful evaluation of argument and evidence. Such a consensus will only be meaningful if scholars have a shared understanding of concepts.

Hjørland suggests that such shared understandings are only possible within domains. Philosophers of science – and especially interdisciplinarians – would argue that a scholarly consensus is most valuable if it involves consensus across many individuals with diverse perspectives. As Hjørland notes, consensus within a particular domain may reflect various biases rather than an objective evaluation of argument and evidence. The possibility of advance in scholarly understanding hinges importantly, then, on whether different communities of scholars can understand each other well enough to potentially achieve a meaningful consensus across domains. We should thus be wary of assuming that this is impossible (especially as this is in large part an empirical question).

2. Strategies for reducing ambiguity. Complex concepts are ambiguous because different people may disagree regarding their components. If we all defined democracy as "any situation involving voting" then we could all broadly agree on what it meant. Unfortunately, scholars find that there are huge differences across voting systems and thus wish to define democracy more narrowly. Different scholars may say that a certain polity is not really democratic because of the way candidates are selected, who gets to vote, how voting is done, whether there is physical coercion, whether certain human rights are protected, and so on. While these differences of opinion may be instantiated in different theories, this hardly need be the case (see Szostak 2008). Macroeconomists posit quite different theories of business cycles while agreeing on the meaning of the basic concepts involved. Careful definition of complex concepts requires (only) that

these be broken into a set of simpler concepts for which some shared understanding is possible. Can scholars of democracy develop some typology of ‘types of candidate-selection system’ on which they agree (even while perhaps continuing to disagree about whether a system in which many potential candidates are not allowed to run qualifies as democratic)? This is an empirical question. Szostak (2004) broke many similarly complex concepts such as ‘culture’ into constituent parts. Scholars could if necessary easily and precisely distinguish their definition of ‘culture’ by adding and/or subtracting from this list of components.

The task for information scientists is to strive for a list of ‘basic’ concepts: the phenomena of which the world is comprised, and the sorts of relations that exist among these. If a fair degree of consensus is possible here *across scholarly communities*, then any complex concept utilized by any individual or group can potentially be translated into basic terms that everyone can understand. Hjørland suggests that different scholarly communities disagree even at this basic level. Yet they most likely disagree about the *relative importance* of different phenomena and relationships rather than the *very existence* of particular phenomena or relationships. It remains to be established that ontological outlooks are incommensurate across domains.

Hjørland laudably advocates a careful inductive reading of the literature in different domains in order to understand how concepts relate to each other. I am not sure that one could make any sense of the relationship among ‘patriarchy’, ‘culture’, and ‘globalization’ except by breaking each into combinations of basic concepts. If so, and we can achieve a fair degree of consensus on basic concepts, then the domain analysis favored by Hjørland becomes complementary (in both directions) to an effort to develop a universal classification of basic concepts [Such as the Integrative Levels Classification at www.iskoi.org/ilc]

Hjørland worries about infinite regress in trying to define one concept in terms of another. He thus doubts the very existence of basic concepts. This is a very radical claim: all KOS in widespread use are grounded in some belief that breaking complex concepts into simpler concepts is a useful strategy. I would suggest that trying to define concepts in a circular fashion – where each definition depends on all others – is an even more difficult enterprise than defining them hierarchically.

3. Information science is the answer. Conceptual ambiguity is not a given but can be reduced by classification. The very act of placing a phenomenon into only one place in a universal hierarchical classification tells us what sort of thing it is (what is the broader term?), what sort of thing it is not (all the elements of the hierarchy that it is not related to vertically), what it is similar too (the other things that share the same immediate broader term), and what sort of things it comprises in turn (narrower terms).

Information scientists have devoted much more effort to classifying things than relationships. Indeed, relationships (think of communication) are often treated as if they are phenomena. Nevertheless, we can reasonably aspire to some shared understanding of what words such as ‘influence’, ‘move physically’, and ‘communicate with’ mean. As with things, some relationships may combine simpler relationships (intimidation combines communication with some suggestion of force).

The unfortunate degree of ambiguity to which Hjørland refers has emerged in a scholarly environment (dis-) served only by discipline-based KOS. In such

classifications the same phenomenon appears in many different places within many different hierarchies and often is called by different names. His answer is to push even farther in the direction of discipline-specific KOS. In a world served by a universal classification of basic concepts, and the use of synthetic notation for complex concepts, scholars might reasonably be expected to carefully define their terms in a manner that all could understand. If they did not, information scientists could do this for them (or signal when a concept was used in a manner that left its meaning unclear).

Ironically to be sure, the domain analysis advocated by Hjørland is one important strategy for getting us to such a world. Unless complemented by an effort to develop a universal classification of basic concepts, however, such a strategy is destined to take us away from the overarching goal of enhancing human understanding through scholarship.

Conclusion: Though Hjørland favors a pragmatic approach, he laudably appreciates that there is much that is good in alternative approaches to the treatment of concepts. Once we accept that the goal of scholarship is/should be to enhance understanding, then the pragmatic approach moves toward the ‘classical’ approach of understanding complex concepts in terms of basic phenomena and relationships. The approach recommended here also embraces elements of the rationalist and empirical approaches. Interdisciplinary scholarship urges us to seek this sort of integration of diverse views. .

Hjørland, B. (2009). Concept Theory. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 60 (8), 1519-36.

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