Meeting notes: Words Matter as a knowledge graph

12 October 2021, 11:00–12:30

Participants

Interviewers: Andrei Nesterov, Laura Hollink, Jacco van Ossenbruggen.
Experts: Cindy Zalm (Head of Delivery and Realisation), Marijke Kunst (Registrator); the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, National Museum of World Cultures), Tropenmuseum; website: https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en

Agenda

1. Intro and welcome
2. Why do we want to model contentious terms and how "Words Matter" is helpful? Presentation by Andrei Nesterov (~ 25 min)
   a. Why did we take "Words Matter" as an input for our research?
   b. What are our objectives?
   c. What have we done so far?
   d. How are we gonna use it? Plans
   e. How can the museum benefit from our research and why do we need collaboration with the domain experts?
3. Questions and comments from Cindy Zalm and Marijke Kunst
4. Questions from Andrei Nesterov, Laura Hollink, and Jacco van Ossenbruggen
5. Ideas on further collaboration

General questions

Responses of the experts are in green.

1. Can you tell us how "Words Matter" is used? Maybe you have feedback from other museum curators who used "Words Matter"?
   Registrars in other museums and other cultural heritage institutions tell us that they use Words that Matter (f.i. Geheugen van Nederland, RCE, ModeMuze). For registration in collection management database and text writing.
   They ask when a follow up will be published. They specifically demand lists of sensitive/offensive terms and alternatives.
   Curators: NMvW curators and other colleagues use WM. But how about curators in other museums?

2. Are you planning to publish new versions of "Words Matter"?
   A follow up is in preparation. Publication date? Spring 2022?

3. Would you change/add anything in the current publication (that is important/critical)?
   More sensitive/offensive terms and alternatives.

4. How did you find contentious words in the museum collection (what are the criteria?) and how did you find suggestions for them?
   The sensitive/offensive words in WM were/are highly inconvenient words in and outside the museum, much discussed, much used. F.i. the word 'neger' is more known than 'Cree''. The list of words is longer and will also grow because it is an ongoing concern.
   Is this a regular task in the museum or was it mainly done to prepare the publication?
   It is a regular task. In 2019 the thesaurus on cultural and geographical research, and object terms were checked by registrars and curators.
   Captions/titles of objects and photographs in the collection are being checked and sensitive words replaced by alternatives. Public text which is shown on screen in the permanent exhibition in Museum Volkenkunde was also checked. Next challenge will be: checking descriptions of objects and photographs in the collection database.

5. Did you use any external resources when creating "Words Matter"?
   Some authors of WM quote other authors (see notes).

   Words Matter is also based on internal research.
   In 2011 Alex van Stipriaan published *Spreken we dezelfde taal?* Based on conversations with Tropen Museum staff.
   https://www.eur.nl/people/alex-van-stipriaan-luiscius

   In 2016 Rebecca de Vicary-Smith (University of Cambridge) researched sensitive words in museum collections during an internship at the Research Center for Material Culture. uk.linkedin.com › rebecca-vicary-smith-641768111

   Observations and discussions in Tropenmuseum in 2016/2017/2018 by people who attended the project 'Decolonize The Museum'.

   Claire Smith (2005): "Decolonising The Museum: The National Museum of the American Indian on Washington, DC"

6. What is the licence of the publication? Can we use and publish the text from "Words Matter" in our linked open data version?
   Yes, it's open source

7. How do you work with linked open data? How does the website (collectie.wereldculturen.nl) work/show the collection?
   Thesaurus terms have a handleID (http://vocab.getty.edu/aat/300244813).

Detailed questions

1. How was the English version created? Was it directly translated from Dutch? Which entries were just translated in English and which are 'unique'/language-specific in the

publications (cannot be seen as 'another language version')?
Most chapters were written in Dutch and translated into English. Other chapters were bi-lingual or originally in English.

2. Why are some entries in the English version in Dutch? ("Politionele actie", "Jappenkampen", "Inboorling").
    Dutch words, which lose their meaning and context by translating them. F.i. 'inboorling' should be translated into 'native': 'native' is not offensive, ínboorling' is highly offensive.

3. Page 131, "Politionele actie". Is "Agresi Militer Belanda I & II" in the first suggestion a suggested alternative?
    In recent social posts we mentioned it 'Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog' (Independence War). Curators suggest this term. It was a war and not a 'battle'.

4. Page 135, "Race". The second suggestion. Does it still refer to the term "race" or to "racism"? "Racism" cannot be an alternative for "race", right?
    Indeed, race and racism are closely linked to each other but not the same. Thinking in terms of different races can cause racism.

5. Page 139, "Third World". Clarify. Are "developing nations" and "low-income countries" suggestions? Or they are contested, and there are no suggestions?
    Have to check what the alternative can be.

6. Page 143, "Western". Are you saying that the words "not Western", "developed", "undeveloped" are also contentious?
    Yes, according to us they are offensive. 'Developed' and 'undeveloped' are more easily to avoid but 'Western' is a very handy term. Readers understand immediately which part of the world you address. Sometimes it can be replaced by 'European'. Buth when you mean Western people from North America is it difficult: North-American people is not an option. You need an extra sentence to explain which people you mean.

7. Page 144, "White". Do you suggest using "White" instead of "Blank"? (there's a statement in the Suggestions section, but not a suggestion to use a particular word)
    We don't use the word 'blank' anymore, we use 'white'.

Contact

Andrei Nesterov, nesterov@cwi.nl