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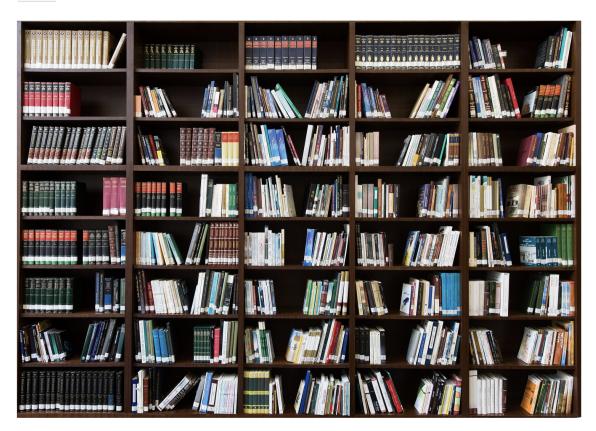**March 31, 2023**

Q&A: Developing a new Spanish-language controlled vocabulary of LGBTQIA+ terms

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Marika Cifor, University of Washington assistant professor in the Information School, will spend the next three years developing a free-standing Spanish-language controlled vocabulary of LGBTIA+ terms. *Pixabay*

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https://www.washington.edu/news/2023/03/31/qa-developing-a-new-spanish-language-controlled-vocabulary-of-lgbtqia-terms/

[The Homosaurus](#) is a linked data controlled vocabulary used by libraries, museums and other cultural heritage institutions worldwide to describe LGBTQIA+ resources and aid in indexing and retrieving content.

With updated versions released twice a year, the Homosaurus has expanded its English-language vocabulary to include more than 2,500 terms. Now, [Marika Cifor](#) will spend the next three years developing a free-standing Spanish-language Homosaurus.

Cifor, University of Washington assistant professor in the Information School, was awarded a 2023 [grant](#) from the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) and will serve as the project co-director with [K.J. Rawson](#), associate professor of English and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Northeastern University. Cifor has been involved with the Homosaurus since 2016 and is a member of the editorial board.

UW News sat down with Cifor to talk about the Homosaurus, the newly funded project and the importance of increasing access to LGBTQIA+ resources.

Q: What is the Homosaurus and why is it significant?

Marika Cifor *University of Washington*

MC: Subject classification very often shapes how we find materials. We obviously hope when we search, a library catalog returns results that are relevant to what we're looking for. These catalog records, archival finding aids or museum descriptions shape not only what we can find but how we understand it. The way in which LGBTQIA+ people, communities and knowledges have been described is often deeply inadequate. Information about LGBTQIA+ people is either not there at all or it misrepresents people's knowledge and experiences. That's true not just for LBGTQIA+ people, but for other people from historically and institutionally excluded communities as well.

We'll work with these partners over the next three years. In the first year, we'll work with graduate students at Northeastern University to identify terms that have an equivalent in both English and Spanish and to complete direct translations. In the second year, our partners will work closely with a postdoctoral fellow at the UW Information School, who will hopefully be someone who brings expertise in the language and subject matter. They'll be working with each of our partner organizations to develop subject terms that fit their collections and reflect the needs and values of their stakeholders and community members. In the third year, we'll be expanding back out to talk to librarians, archivists and community members to try to make this vocabulary as widely usable and relevant as possible.

Q: Do you see the Spanish-language Homosaurus as a potential launching point to develop a vocabulary in other languages as well?

MC: Absolutely. We've had individual users of the vocabulary and even small groups reach out about developing translations. We know of translations currently in process in French and Swedish, for example. That is obviously long and extensive work, and it's ideally done by a diverse group of community members who will bring a depth of knowledge of a language in a particular region.

The Homosaurus is a linked data vocabulary of LGBTQIA+ terms that improves access to LGBTQIA+ resources — such as public library books, records in archives and objects in museums — because it provides an LGBTQIA+ specific subject term vocabulary to represent what a collection is about. While the Homosaurus started in 1997 as a vocabulary to describe one LGBTQIA+ archive's collection, it has vastly expanded to be a resource that can be used for any place that is a LGBTQIA+ cultural heritage institution or has LGBTQIA+ materials in its collections. It is now used by everywhere from large public library systems and academic library consortia to small, grassroots community-based archives.

Q: Can you explain the process of creating a Spanish-language Homosaurus?

MC: The Homosaurus board has been thinking about how limiting it is to have a vocabulary that's mostly in one language. Just doing a direct translation doesn't feel adequate and reinforces the centrality of the English language. For example, there might be a direct equivalent in Spanish for word "lesbian" in English, but there are other words that might exist only in Spanish and might not have an English equivalent. Direct translation seems simple on its surface, but it won't be culturally adequate to the kind of vocabulary we want to build.

For this project, we decided to work with three different kinds of organizations in the West and Southwest: the James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center at the San Francisco Public Library, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the Arizona Queer Archives. Those organizations are in regions where Spanish is the first or predominant language of many of their users, where we've missed an opportunity as information organizations and professionals to connect those users and this information.

Our hope is that, starting with Spanish, we'll be able to develop a multi-language platform for the Homosaurus itself. We can already use language codes — codes used to organize library collections or presentations of data — to identify terms, but we'll be happy to have more robust capacities to write things like scope notes, which tell information professionals how to use a term correctly in multiple languages, and even dialects of those languages. Those notes are currently only in English. We'll need to develop the capacity to have the full record in both Spanish and English languages, and hopefully add many others in the future. It's our hope that we can develop a kind of community-centric model and process that can support others in making alternative free-standing vocabularies in other languages.

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