



Preface to Launch Issue

COLLECTION:
DIGITAL MODERN
LANGUAGES SECTION
LAUNCH ISSUE

ARTICLES – DIGITAL
MODERN LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

This is the preface to the first issue in the new Digital Modern Languages section of Modern Languages Open. It engages with the content of the articles in the issue, and also reflects on the intersections between Modern Languages research, and digital media technologies. It highlights how the articles within the special issue, through the guidance of Spence and Wells, raise the visibility of digital research and pedagogy in Modern Languages, and also engage closely with the distinctive linguistic and cultural perspectives of digital practice.

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It is an exciting moment to witness the publication of this first issue in the new Digital Modern Languages section of Modern Languages Open. This new section, providing a space for reflection on the intersections between Modern Languages research and digital media technologies in their broadest sense, is the result of a sustained effort by leading researchers such as Paul Spence and Naomi Wells who lead the section, and this landmark first issue constitutes a starting point for a new and vibrant series of publications to come.

Having a wide remit in terms of subject matter, disciplinary approach and time period, what underpins this new section is the desire both to increase the visibility of digital research and pedagogy in Modern Languages, and also to engage closely with the distinctive linguistic and cultural perspectives of digital practice, offering a corrective to the dominance of Anglophone paradigms which are often employed to explain the digital, or are assumed to be universal, one-size-fits-all models.

This launch issue constitutes just such an example of this remit. Giving a taste of the section and the other issues to come, it brings together a wide disciplinary range of contributors, with articles taking approaches ranging from cultural studies, corpora studies and digital humanities, through to sociolinguistics and pedagogy. Their contributions provide resounding evidence of the points of interconnection that have arisen in recent years between Modern Languages and critical digital studies, highlighting not merely how Modern Languages research can also 'do digital', but also how Modern Languages research can actively transform the current debates and state of play in digital studies.

Indeed, we might read this through what Spence and Brandao have observed in a recent piece where they note, with regard to digital pedagogy, that there is to date "little research exploring how online/digital (and hybrid) pedagogies are mediated by languages and distinct geocultural perspectives", and that discussion is predominantly shaped around how "'digital' can transform 'languages', rather than the other way around" (Spence and Brandao 3–4). This launch issue of the new section proposes precisely to counteract this tendency: all the contributions to this issue are informed by the notion of languages as transformative, and the authors reveal, in their different ways, how Modern Languages-informed research contributes to, revitalizes, and moves forward the very field of digital studies in itself.

Moreover, the ways in which this is thought through in this launch issue demonstrate just how wide-reaching Modern Languages' contributions to digital scholarship can be. The issue contains two contributions in the growing field of languages-focused digital pedagogy, including on the one hand an exploration of how the teaching of languages in the primary school curriculum can be enhanced and enriched by finding novel ways to motivate children to learn languages through digital means and, on the other, a study into how e-tandem practices can help L2 development in adult distance learners in Chinese. Both of these articles make the point that it is not the case of simply 'adopting' a generic digital technology into the Modern Languages classroom; rather, a critical and language-specific analysis is required.

Similarly, contributions to digital scholarship from a sociolinguistics perspective are in evidence in two of the articles included here: a study on vernacular mythologies proposes how we might adapt semiotic approaches for the digital world, exploring in particular how social network services provide us with opportunities to rethink myth-making by non-elites; while another contribution discusses the development of infrastructure for a corpus-based sociolinguistic comparative investigation of language attitudes by Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian Twitter users. In both of these cases, it is not a matter of employing purported 'universal' digital methods unquestioningly; rather, both contributions explore the culturally specific ways in which digital technologies are employed by everyday users.

Corpora in multiple languages is also an important theme in this issue, with, again, a very clear sense of how multilingual corpora require close attention and a rethinking of existing techniques. An article focusing on the multilingual European Literary Text Collection—a resource that brings together French, Portuguese, Romanian, and Slovenian novels—explores the complexities of building comparable collections of novels across multiple languages and distant reading approaches; another contribution focuses on translations of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and the challenges of creating digital maps of the global distribution of these translations, examining in particular how digital investigation of the type-token ratio can be a productive tool for analysis of translations in multiple languages, in combination with human

close reading. Both of these pieces provide an important counterpoint to much corpus-building work that assumes an Anglophone source text, with lessons learned regarding collaborative and multilingual corpus-building.

Regarding what we might term digital cultural studies, two articles make incisive contributions: one analyses a Brazilian meme, tracing its circulation and investigating how what was originally a catchphrase in popular music became a touchstone taken up by civil society groups and activists protesting against armed violence in Rio de Janeiro; the second offers an overview of the development of Italian electronic literature, with a particular focus on two case studies. Again, notable here is the attention to the situatedness of the cultural production in question: in the case of the former, the analysis reveals how certain memes both circulate globally *and* are rooted in highly embedded, local, place-based protests; in the latter, the author traces a long literary heritage stretching back to some of the canonical authors of twentieth-century Italian literature, revealing how electronic literature has roots that go way beyond the Anglophone.

While it is hard to choose just one of the contributions to end on in this preface, the article about multilingualism and Digital Humanities (DH) is perhaps an ideal place to do so. Focusing on collaborative and East Asia-related DH initiatives, this article argues for the importance of sensitivity in research, teaching, and knowledge dissemination to create a more inclusive, collaborative, and multilingual DH. Such a call is particularly timely, chiming with recent debates within DH communities, particularly those that call for greater geographical and linguistic diversity (Galina Russell 2014), and for the need to decolonize DH (Risam 2018). The article in question engages with these wider debates, and is a strong example of how Modern Languages-informed research into the digital can be part of a broader project of transforming DH.

All of the contributions to this launch issue, despite their different approaches and subject matter, share common goals; what unites them in their endeavour is an attention to the linguistic and cultural specificities of the material with which they work, coupled with a critical rethinking of digital technologies as in any way 'universal', 'neutral', or purely Anglophone. These exciting discussions give us much food for thought, and are an indication of the vibrancy and relevance of Modern Languages-informed approaches to the digital today.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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