



Introduction: Digital Modern Languages Launch Issue

COLLECTION:
DIGITAL MODERN
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LAUNCH ISSUE

INTRODUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the Digital Modern Languages Launch Issue outlines our aims for the Section to bring together and expand research that engages with digital culture, media and technologies in relation to languages other than English. With the Issue encompassing literary and cultural studies, linguistics, pedagogical and computational research, we highlight how a heterogeneity of approaches contributes to a generous and productive transdisciplinary culture that ideally defines both Modern Languages and the Digital Humanities. We further emphasise how the contributors to this Issue demonstrate the value and necessity of the specific linguistic and cultural expertise that Modern Languages researchers and students bring in terms of how we make sense of our place in increasingly digital worlds.

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This launch issue of the Digital Modern Languages Section is the result of long-term efforts and initiatives to both consolidate and further research that engages with digital culture, media, and technologies in relation to languages other than English. In 2019, we created the Digital Modern Languages seminar series¹ in recognition of the fact that while a number of Modern Languages researchers, as well as those in related fields such as linguistics, area studies, and comparative literature, were carrying out important and cutting-edge digital research, it had a tendency to remain siloed within both discrete language areas and particular research areas (Spence and Brandao).² While these smaller disciplinary or culturally specific communities remain important, what was largely absent, at least in the UK context, was the sense of a critical mass of practical and theoretical digital research within Modern Languages that could be sustained and, most importantly, further expanded in order to keep pace with the ways in which rapidly evolving digital media and technologies change both “what we think about and the instruments we think with” (Ortega 160).

Digital research continues to occupy a relatively marginal position within the disciplinary structures of Modern Languages, and in turn, beyond a small number of ground-breaking individuals (see, for example, Taylor and Thornton), Modern Languages researchers have tended to occupy a marginal presence within the Digital Humanities, particularly in comparison with their humanities counterparts in history and English literature. As will be evident to the reader, while our own research and networks are embedded in a broader international context, we write and edit this issue from the perspective of being situated within UK-based Modern Languages and Digital Humanities structures.³ At the same time, the limited visibility of Digital Modern Languages research in the UK connects with wider international challenges, and in particular the overwhelming dominance of English in digital (humanities) research, both in terms of the objects of study and research infrastructures (Pitman and Taylor). While Modern Linguists are by no means the only researchers capable of drawing our attention to other languages and cultural contexts, within predominantly anglophone contexts such as the UK their research makes a vital contribution to decentering the English language and associated Anglo-American cultural texts and practices as the sole focus of study in the academy. Recent reports have emphasized that despite the seeming “linguistic indifference” in many academic and wider social contexts (Forsdick), there is in reality an increasingly urgent need for students and researchers to develop and apply forms of linguistic and cultural expertise that can help us to understand and engage in processes of transcultural and translingual interchange (see, for instance, British Academy). More specifically, Modern Linguists have a vital role to play in terms of how we make sense of our place in more interconnected, and increasingly digital, worlds. Within the broadly conceived languages research community there is also a long tradition of pedagogical research, with researchers in the dynamic field of language learning addressing the new forms of literacy associated with digital media and technologies (see Guikema and Williams, and Román-Mendoza). This research has major implications for the work of their counterparts in literary and cultural studies in both Modern Languages and the Digital Humanities, but such connections remain limited due to continued divisions between research and teaching, and associated pedagogical-focused research, within university structures.

The aim of this special issue is consequently to illustrate in practice the current and potential future contributions of Digital Modern Languages research, with ‘Digital’ and ‘Modern Languages’ both broadly conceived to encompass the multiplicity of methodological and theoretical approaches and range of objects of study that reflect the heterogeneity of the field. While we have intended to incorporate distinct perspectives, both in relation to languages and research areas, we would not claim to be comprehensive and there are inevitable absences, both due to the limitations of a single special issue but also because of our own positionings and

1 More information and recordings of previous seminars can be found on our website (<https://digitalmodernlanguages.wordpress.com/>) and YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJJdpdSrtxqfBX5R3r3KVIA>). The seminar series arose from our research as part of two projects “Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community” and “Language Acts and Worldmaking”, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council through its Open World Research Initiative.

2 This is in contrast to other fields where concepts such as ‘digital classics’ or ‘digital history’ have gained traction in recent years and generated a significant body of research.

3 English literature research, for example, is likely to be situated within Modern Languages departments in non-Anglophone contexts, while within the USA, the Modern Language Association encompasses English literature research, unlike Modern Languages structures in the UK.

networks as editors.⁴ The issue is, however, not intended to summarize or provide an overview of all existing research in this area, but rather to give a sense of research that is breaking new ground, whether by bringing new digitally informed methodological or pedagogical approaches to traditional objects or forms of study, or by applying established theoretical or analytical approaches to new forms of digital cultural text.

The articles included here reflect areas of existing strength in Modern Languages, such as the growing body of work on Latin American digital culture and its relationship to wider social, cultural, and political dynamics in the region as illustrated in Holmes's contribution on Brazil. The previously mentioned pedagogical innovations and insights associated with language learning research are exemplified in Macleroy, Hackney, and Sahmland's, and Lewis and Kan's projects that emphasize how digital media and technologies can be used in both school-based and university education to support not just the learning of a language, but also the development of a much broader range of associated creative, critical, and intercultural competencies. Schöch, Erjavec, Patras, and Santos's and Reynolds and Vitali's articles on corpus-building and distant reading reflect significant areas of literary research in the Digital Humanities, while both bring to the fore the epistemic insights gleaned in the process of both constructing and analysing cross-languages and cross-cultural text corpora. Patti's and Blackwood's papers illustrate how the study of digital media and texts within Modern Languages should not be seen as necessitating a rupture in the field, with their respective uses of the 'pre-digital' works of Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes as theoretical frameworks for analysing electronic literature and social media content foregrounding continuities with earlier approaches. Lastly, Fišer, Ljubešić, and Popič's and Horvath's contributions stress the importance and value of creating and sustaining research infrastructures that can support the still underexplored potential of digital research through and about other languages and scripts.

Taken together, while each of these articles represents a vital area of Digital Modern Languages research, there is a heterogeneity of approaches which reflects the often fragmented status of the Modern Languages (and sister disciplines) as a field, and so it feels important to reflect on the overarching coherence of this broad area of research. As a starting point, we would observe that both Modern Languages and the Digital Humanities are defined by a highly transdisciplinary culture that is, ideally, generous and open to the different methodological, analytical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives and approaches that different researchers bring to the field.⁵ It is in this spirit of openness and generosity that we encourage the reader to make potentially unexpected but productive connections between the articles included and, we hope, with the reader's own research specialism. For example, the value of collaboration and cooperation between individuals with distinct linguistic and cultural expertise is emphasized both in relation to forms of e-tandem learning in Lewis and Kan, and also as central to the success of the collaborative team projects and initiatives described in Schöch, Erjavec, Patras, and Santos; Reynolds and Vitali; Fišer, Ljubešić, and Popič; and Horvath. Equally, the forms of digital literacy and creativity fostered in the early years of language learning showcased in Macleroy, Hackney, and Sahmland have clear links with the new ways of critically and creatively using and analysing digital media that need to be further developed among Modern Languages university students, in order to expand the community of researchers undertaking the forms of digital culture research exemplified by Blackwood, Holmes and Patti. The various contributions to this issue also highlight the complementarity of new computational methods and more traditional forms of qualitative and textual analysis, both when combined within a single project (for example in Reynolds and Vitali) but also in terms of how different approaches to similar objects of study such as social media content can together contribute to our broader understanding of the new linguistic and cultural practices associated with these platforms (for instance in Blackwood and in Fišer, Ljubešić, and Popič).

The breadth of cultural practices and texts studied across the issue—spanning the canonical, the popular, and the quotidian—points to how Digital Modern Languages research can contribute to more holistic approaches to the study of culture in its digital and non-digital

⁴ In particular, we acknowledge that this collection focuses primarily on official national languages and that there is a need to give greater attention to what are often termed 'minority' or 'low-resource' languages, which we hope will be addressed in future collections edited by researchers with relevant expertise.

⁵ Here we would also like to acknowledge the key contributions of our anonymous peer reviewers drawn from across Modern Languages and the Digital Humanities, whose extremely constructive feedback demonstrated both the rigour and the openness to novel perspectives that underpins this transdisciplinary culture.

forms. Several articles also illustrate that while often creating a distinct set of challenges not found in other forms of digital research, researching across languages and cultures has the potential to offer vital new perspectives on established digital methods and our understanding of digital ecosystems fundamentally designed for a small number of majority languages (specifically English). In particular, emphasis on the very specific linguistic and cultural expertise that different researchers bring and that teaching in Modern Languages aims to foster, acts as a critique and challenge to universalistic approaches to digital methods and to the study of digital culture. We recognize that this issue provides an inevitably partial snapshot of just some of these perspectives and approaches, but our intention is that it should motivate and inspire others working in the broadly conceived field of Modern Languages to further research in this area, and that it act as an invitation for researchers to bring their own unique contribution to expanding understandings and approaches to the study and uses of rapidly evolving digital media and technologies.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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