NLP and the humanities: the revival of an old liaison

The humanities and the field of natural language processing (NLP) have always had common play-grounds. The liaison as never constrained to linguistics; also philosophical, philological and literary studies have had their impact on NLP, and there have always been dedicated on conferences and journals for the humanities and the NLP community of which the journal Computers and the Humanities (1966-2004) is the most prominent hallmark. The first NLP systems were oriented toward natural linguistics and at the same time to literary studies and philology. This liaison has always been tight and gives some of the best results, but it is not the only one. NLP and humanities have a long tradition of interaction, and now it is time to reflect on it.

The second period lasted through the Seventies until the early Eighties. Humanities scholars learned now to write their own programs, as programming languages became easier to master (Kenny, 1992). A few pre-scientific computer-aided projects were performed in the field of literary analysis in the late 1950s, but the period between the 1960s and the 1970s is still regarded as the period of the “first generation” of research in digital humanities—digital humanities in the narrow sense, not in the broad sense of digital scholarship. The first generation of computer systems was characterized by a group of researchers who were interested in the field of language and literature, and who were using computers to perform tasks that were previously done manually. The main goal of these projects was to automate the process of cataloging and indexing literary works, and to make it possible for researchers to access and analyze large amounts of text data. The first generation of digital humanities research was primarily driven by the need to handle large amounts of data, and by the desire to make it possible for researchers to conduct systematic analyses of text data. This period was characterized by a focus on the technical aspects of digital humanities, and by a lack of integration with the humanities disciplines. However, it was during this period that the field of digital humanities began to take shape, and that the first digital humanities projects were launched.

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