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Interview Fotis Jannidis - TextGrid

7-8 minutes

Prof. Dr. Fotis Jannidis on Digital Editing and the History of TextGrid

What does the term "digital edition" mean?

Jannidis: Basically, a digital edition is an edition which is distributed via a digital media instead of being printed. But the change does not only affect the way editions are distributed but also how they can be used and how they are created. In a printed edition the editor decides which version of the text will be the text seen by the reader while the other versions are more or less hidden in the critical apparatus. In many digital editions, readers can now decide with a click of the mouse which text is for them the basis and which versions will be shown in the apparatus. They can also alternate between the scanned manuscript and a version in modern typeface, or they can display notes and other textual variants on the screen without having to immerse themselves in a complex system of special characters, as would be the case with a printed edition. In order to comprehend the process by which texts are

created, the textual variants can even be displayed dynamically so that readers can view their progression first-hand. Dynamic and interactive visualization is one of the most revolutionary possibilities offered by digital editions.

In the future, will textual editing take place exclusively in a digital format?

Jannidis: Probably both digital and print editions will continue to exist for a long time, but all printed editions originate in a digital format. The possibilities that are open to readers of digital editions – for example, to search within them, to update them, and to use them for other purposes – do not exist with printed editions.

How did you become involved with TextGrid?

Jannidis: For 30 years textual scholars have worked with TUSTEP, a toolbox for scholarly processing data. It has been regularly maintained and updated and is very reliable, but the user interface corresponds to the standards of the 1970s. For this reason, several of my colleagues and I started searching for new programs that would be more user-friendly and enable collaborative work. We learned about the D-Grid initiative and quickly recognized that grid technology offered us a chance to create a new generation of networked tools.

You hoped, then, to develop a set of tools or instruments for your needs …

Jannidis: At first, yes, but it soon became clear to us that significantly more was at stake: the creation of a virtual research environment for researchers in the humanities. Within this research environment, very different tools will be made available. These tools will be sufficient for many purposes, but if the particular requirements of a project cannot be realized, then either the existing tools can be further developed or new tools can be integrated into TextGrid because TextGrid exists under an Open Source license. Furthermore, TextGrid is also a work environment in which data can be saved securely.

Are there similar developments outside of Germany?

Jannidis: TextGrid is probably one of the most advanced projects of this kind that exist worldwide. There are similar projects, but TextGrid has made the most progress in realizing the infrastructure – which is the reason why others want to work with us. In the meantime, TextGrid has become the core of an EU project dealing with developing an infrastructure for electronic editions. What we are now creating should at the same time be reusable for others: not just the research results, but the tools and services as well. We are also trying to incorporate services developed by others (such as programs that are accessible via the Internet). It has become clear to many of us who work on the development of software for the humanities that while we are in fact often working on similar projects, the number of participants is entirely manageable. It

would be utterly senseless to invent the same tools twice, and it is much more convenient to split up the work.

How will digital research methods change your field?

Jannidis: Textual scholarship has already changed fundamentally. Digital editions are now a productive area for research; not only are new possibilities revealed with every improvement, but new questions are posed as well. Using quantitative procedures for textual analysis in order to appeal to a wider field of research, we now have an instrument that makes it possible to answer old questions in new ways and to use a broader body of texts. More important, however, is that we can ask completely new questions. In the medium and long term, the face of the field will change completely, and for some of us the field has already been fundamentally transformed. But not all literary scholars are ready to make use of these new discoveries. There are a lot of reservations about empirical techniques, and open hostility, too.

How do you picture working with TextGrid once it is finished?

Jannidis: I hope that TextGrid will be an easy-to-use instrument for preparing editions that can be flexibly adapted to many different requirements, at the same time guaranteeing both the reliability and sustainable usability of the edited data. I also expect that a new instrument for textual analysis will be

created, since I see here a special opportunity for development within the field to take advantage of the possibilities of digitisation and networking. As an American colleague put it: "What Do You Do With a Million Books?" Once there is a comprehensive corpus of German literature in TextGrid, one that is marked up with metadata containing information about the date of creation and genre, then researchers can begin to ask interesting new questions. How do narrator's commentary and forms of speech representation emerge in German-language novels? What types of narrative techniques accompany the psychologization of the novel? How are certain character types, such as the sentimental lover, represented across genres and how does their description change? The basis for such studies is not limited to the established literary canon, but also includes popular literature and texts that are less familiar to us today but were part of the "elite" literature in previous eras. Some of this we will be able to do soon, but other options will certainly take some time, but we definitely want to move in this direction.

Interview by Esther Lauer.

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