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Interview Tobias Blanke - TextGrid

6-7 minutes

Dr. Tobias Blanke on Grid Projects in the UK and Working with TextGrid

When did British Research councils start investing in grid technology?

Blanke: In the UK there has been a grid initiative for the natural sciences since the late 1990's, and it was equipped with a lot of money. Initially the focus was on technical problems. People believed that by simply installing the proper technology all researchers would participate and re-invent scholarship. But it seldom works like that. The application of any technology is always a social issue as well. The grid utopia of unrestricted data and resource sharing, rendered possible via a technical connection between several individual computers, could not be achieved solely with a "technology offensive" because there are too many social problems and dissimilar detailed requirements. Nowadays, the grid initiative has become more of a joint project, made up of all the sciences and humanities disciplines, that includes a great deal

of research on the social aspects of technology, with an vast number of applications for these detailed requirements. The results were therefore somewhat different than we had originally planned …

Initially the humanities could not formally apply for funds in the context of this grid project. The “Arts and Humanities” did not have the status of a Research Council and were therefore not permitted to act as an applicant for the grid project. After their organization into a Research Council, they joined the British Grid initiative at about the same time as TextGrid was formed in Germany. However, there were different approaches: While TextGrid is a single, very comprehensive project, we had many small projects. Our relatively late start protected us from the inflated expectations of the early years because by then it was clearer what grid technology could do and what it could not.

How will the incorporation of e-Science methods change the humanities?

Blanke: “Science” in English, unlike German, refers only to the natural sciences, so when we talk about “e-Science” in the humanities in English, that includes more than just the application of digital technologies. It means that humanities researchers are also working with scientific methods. Thus, e-Science in the humanities is also a methodological experiment.

Are the humanities struggling for recognition?

Blanke: Since the rapid development of the natural sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the humanities have lost their social importance and have been fighting for recognition ever since. The impact of this struggle varies by discipline: In philosophy, for example, it made researchers pay more attention to the history of knowledge and logic. I think, however, it is time to leave these old battles behind us. Really interesting results are possible if you are not mired in ideological debates about whether humanities scholars now have to work with methods from the natural sciences, but instead you can impartially consider the contributions offered by these new techniques. It is remarkable what computers and therefore computer sciences can also do for humanities research. Even if you think that humanities topics are too complex and context-dependant to be analyzed with digital methods, it must be admitted that computers, when used on a large scale, can discover a lot.

What advantage do have computers over intelligent human readers?

Blanke: People are much better than machines at perceiving things because artificial intelligence has not come very far in resolving complex relationships into simpler ones. That is a human specialty. Machines, on the other hand, can not only work through much larger amounts of data than we can, but their digitally-generated results are also often more consistent. When a person looks at a text and selects relevant passages,

he or she may consider each passage to be relevant in a different way. A computer, on the other hand, always follows the same algorithm and will therefore return comparable results.

Are there connections between the UK grid projects and TextGrid?

Blanke: At King's College, we have perhaps the most well-established research institution in the world for the Digital Humanities: the Centre for Computing in the Humanities (CCH). There, semantic annotations, digital publications of these annotations and of texts and databases are created every day. I work for the Centre for e-Research, which also deals with applications in the sciences. For a year we have carried out a project in which we evaluate how TextGrid could be implimented in similar institutions. We were very eager to work with TextGrid because it has a connection to a community and we recognize the methodology that it tries to simulate without claiming to invent an entirely new humanities discipline. In light of the initially exaggerated hopes connected with the grid, we now know that we must invest much more in communities. What I particularly value about TextGrid is that there was already a community of a textual researchers with an interest in establishing TextGrid. I see a lot of architectural diagrams in my work – layers of models and infrastructures, which are primarily interesting only to computer scientists – but what is rarely seen are computer scientists and humanities

scholars working in such close collaboration on the development of products. TextGrid is an example project here.

Interview by Esther Lauer.

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