

УДК 130.3

Кулиговски Петр

кандидат наук

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История идей и "цифровой поворот": вызовы и ловушки (общий обзор)
The history of concepts and the digital turn: challenges and traps (general overview)

***Abstract:** The following paper is to discuss the challenges and traps for the history of concepts at the threshold of the digital turn. In the first part of the paper, I consider the types of data which can result from using digital tools. Subsequently, I analyse practical examples from an akin branch of humanities, so from Franco Moretti's digital history of literature. In the last part, I pay attention to the necessity of constructing a real institutional background for the sake of recognition and assessment of the opportunities of digital methods and their usefulness for historians of concepts.*

***Keywords:** big data, digital turn, historical sources, history of concepts, quantitative approach.*

Along with the increasing potentiality of using digital tools in humanities, one may note the growing hopes bounded with the emerging new possibilities. However, the spread of hopes is unequal and strongly depends on the specificity of particular disciplines. In widely understood history in the last years, the most influential intervention in this inquiry was contributed by J. Guldi and D. Armitage. In a nutshell, they indicate that historical research – to regain its importance and critical capacity – ought to be conducted in the long-term perspective and based on big data. Amongst their arguments, particularly important is the attempt to prove that nowadays, historians have much more possibilities to work in this wider frame thanks to digital tools (Armitage, Guldi 2014). Their provocative publication has triggered a massive number of reviews and polemics, but in general, many critics seem to share the opinion in the main subject that humanities have to face the digital turn, which is both a chance and a trap.

The aim of the following paper is to sketch the main opportunities and threats, connected to using digital tools in the history of concepts. The very posing of such a question may be surprising, as this branch of humanities is perceived as an especially qualitative and reflexive field. Nonetheless, new technologies blur the lines between research areas, making a close cooperation of humanists and computer scientists possible, or at least the prompting part of humanists to develop their competences in the use of new technologies. Of course, at this point there looms the problem of the necessity to spend the time to learn it, which in turn shall entail the question about its usefulness. Therefore, one may ask: what part of history – not available to a researcher so far – opens up thanks to digital tools? (Wrzosek 2017).

During the search for an answer, it is worth starting from a narrower query: what type of data may be offered by digital analysis to a historian of concepts? In the big picture, in the history of concepts (understood as classical Begriffsgeschichte) the identification of «basic concepts» at their source determines further procedures. In this frame, digital analysis may bring a new solution, because, as Ian Ifversen claims – an important feature of «basic concepts» (or, as he calls it, «key concepts») is their relatively high frequency in sources (Ifversen 2011). From this viewpoint, the indication that in some materials, for instance, in newspapers, published in the Greater Poland in the period of 1848 - 1871, the concept of «organic works» was of particular popularity, shall determine the focus on this concept. But is it really so? I can also imagine the «big absent concepts» in some discourses, that is to say, concepts which were not manifested in any single word (or two words), but were presented in other ways (such as whole sentences, or even paragraphs) and retained their pivotal character. Identification of this type of concept is possible only when one uses the «classical» method of close reading.

It seems that digital analysis may offer three main types of data: 1) frequency of specific words/metaphors, 2) correlations of words, 3) information about structures of texts (understood not only as the structure of arguments, but also as its construction, genre, etc.). But the problem is how to transform the past texts into comparable data. Could «Communist Manifesto» be interpreted through focusing on emotions, for instance through emotionally marked adjectives? If so, what kind of new answers may the result of this inquiry bring? What could it mean if it would, turned out that Marx and Engels, when writing, were depressed and that their text was full of grey objects and negative emotions? Or, in another dimension, in this procedure one can pose a question about the methods of manifestation of different phenomena, such as metaphors of crisis, in sources. In this inquiry, however, there emerges the problem with the difference between the term (using as a tool in research task) and the concepts (as presented in the source).

There are still only a few attempts of using digital methods within the history of concepts, so in the search for its practical examples, I would like to pay attention to the methods applied by Franco Moretti, who works on an akin field, namely on the history of literature. Currently, he is probably the most recognized and frequently quoted digital humanists, and he is even building his own research school. Due to lack of space, I cannot discuss in great detail his contribution to the development of discourse-oriented digital humanities, therefore I will limit myself to formulate some remarks regarding a part of his works. One must admit that Moretti's analyses, at first glance, seem to be invigorating and valuable. For instance, when looking at Shakespeare's masterpieces, he attempts to transform plots into data by using diagrams and trees. However, figures obtained in this way shed light only on a small part of novels, such as networks amongst main characters, and do not say anything about, for instance, the descriptions of nature or specific metaphors, creating the ambience of scenes (Moretti 2011). Also in the case of the article about the language of the European Bank, a reader obtains, first

and foremost, a statistical analysis of the language of reports. But the conclusions which come after that are to some extent disappointing. The authors summarise that the European Bank is speaking in a more and more technical and obscure language. In fact, it cannot be surprising for anybody who is aware of the more general changes in the European political discourse that have taken place in the second half of the 20th century (Moretti and Pestre 2015). Furthermore, in another text, in which Moretti analyses «seven thousand titles» of books printed in Great Britain in the period of 1750-1850, his analyses are very interesting, but conclusions are anticlimactic. Moretti, explaining his investigations and its results, states that it was a general change in the book market which caused changes in titles. For instance, they were shortened when a number of printed books increased, because there was less space for a single book on a more saturated market (Moretti 2013, 186–92). However, this conclusion is not new in the light of the existing knowledge, it only describes an old result in a new way.

Anyway, as I have mentioned, digital methods were not wider applied by historians of concepts, and they still did not have enough space to display their potentialities. In fact, the huge problem in testing (old or new) hypotheses by using digital tools is institutional background. It requires, first and foremost, the existence of prepared and searchable databases, which in turn can be built only if one disposes of uniformed sources. In historical sciences, however, a researcher has to face different types of materials which are not only dispersed, but also completely diverse: illegible manuscripts, ephemeral journals, official tables, and so on. It makes the digital analyses almost impossible without prior preparation of the sources to such a procedure.

Without this institutional support, a researcher may apply only free tools, such as NGram Viewer. Many technical problems coupled with it have been described in other works (Zhang 2015). I would like to add that this popular software still does not cover many linguistic areas, such as my mother tongue, Polish. Another thing is, again, the pivotal question of interpretation. As everybody may see after quick inquiry, in the French linguistic area, the concept of communism in the 19th century was at the peak of popularity in the period 1850-1851. It does not mean, however, that then left-wing organizations gained momentum. In contrast: after the defeat of the Spring of Nations, many left-wing groups were dispersed and destroyed. In this case, the high frequency of using the word communism shows only that French anti-communists absorbed and redefined it profoundly, making an effective weapon against political enemies out of it (Fourn 2004). As this arbitrary example displays, quantitative analyses must be conducted with conscious reference to context, otherwise they can bear inadequate, false results.

Another dimension, connected to possible advantages of using digital methods in humanities is that it allows conducting research on big data, the analysis of which in a more traditional way would require a researcher to sacrifice many years. Nonetheless, a new problem looms in this subject, namely: a higher amount of sources does not guarantee a better quality of historical work. Even in certain inquiries, it may be the opposite: longer periods and more massive sources

can obfuscate specific, but meaningful cases, like single changes of meaning of concepts in short-periods. As it has been indicated by distinguished representatives of the history of concepts, this branch bases especially on case studies, which can be compared to each other, rather than on big data and long-term perspective (Palonen 1999, 44).

To conclude, I would like to indicate that my reflections which have been unfolded here are only of preliminary character because we are still at the threshold of real development of digital methods in humanities. Of course, this development is not equal in all branches of humanities. For instance, historians of economy have been using digital tools to set their data in order for many years. Anyway, the digital turn doubtlessly forces historians to pose new methodological questions and to reinterpret the boundaries of their discipline. At this moment, it rather triggers scepticism, or at least plays a supplementary role in conducted research. However, it seems that it still does not display its real potential.

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