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Vergleich als Methode? Zur Empirisierung eines philologischen Verfahrens im Zeitalter der Digital Humanities (Abstract)

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Literary scholars draw comparisons more often than they reflect on the practice of that drawing. Our study of comparisons in hermeneutic practice shows that comparative study is not merely a characteristic of general and comparative literary studies. It can also be found as a (generally qualitative) practice within the monolingual disciplines. The comparison of texts with similar themes is particularly widespread and popular, typically discovering through this comparison the differences and similarities of the literary treatment, in order to prove the aesthetic worth of a work and thus to make increased aesthetic pleasure possible. In addition, there are also studies which, through comparison of sample texts test the validity of statements about literary history or the typology of genres. The practice is particularly associated with comparative literary studies, which claims thus to overcome the limitations of monolingual literary studies. In principle, this form of test study can be extended to an unlimited number of cases, whereby philologists can, among other things, demonstrate how well-read they are. Nevertheless, this form of comparison, too, has to date mostly been used qualitatively, without exploring the potential of a quantitative expansion of the study.

Making reference to Descartes' thesis (1628) that every growth in knowledge is always grounded in a comparison, it is discussed under what circumstances individual case studies may be understood as technically comparative in nature. In this regard one should be careful not to rob the concept of the comparison of the element of differentiation. Therefore, in what follows, we only class studies as comparative when they consider at least two cases (e. g. at least two works), although the main interest of the study may be reserved for one case.

Further, in literary studies, comparisons may be used both to discover the characteristics of the object investigated (›discovery function‹) and as a (sometimes comparatively conceived) control testing the scope of assertions or hypotheses (›control function‹). The emphasis of the use of comparison, as a rule, lies on the qualitative description of the complexity of individual selected cases, whose aesthetic value and place in literary history may thus be judged. By contrast, quantitative comparisons of a few variables within many cases are seldom used by literary scholars. Literary studies have to date hardly taken into account the contrast between quantitative and qualitative comparisons which has been so thoroughly discussed in social science, nor of the attempts to overcome this contrast (for instance through multi-value comparative quantitative analysis, which takes account not only of the need to revise hypotheses, but also the possible necessity of the revision of categories during or after the drawing of comparisons). Instead, an appeal to the ›incomparability‹ of literary art, made as early as 1902 by Benedetto Croce frequently recurs, or the argument, borrowed from Ethnology and Religious Studies, for the need for necessary ›respect for the unique and different nature‹ (Haupt 2013) of the object of study is often made. Earlier attempts at empiricisation, for instance the empirical study of literature movement of the 1970s (cf. Schmidt 2005), were unable to establish themselves, much less become part of the regular course of German Studies. This was partly because the fundamentally hermeneutically oriented field of literary studies

could not accept the empiricists' rejection of hermeneutic methods (cf. Ort 1994). There was an almost reflex professorial defence of interpretative reading.

Consequently, we think it important that empiricism should no longer be conceived of as an argument against hermeneutic approaches to philological objects of study, but rather to make it available as a useful aid to the improvement of established methods of literary study (cf. Groeben 2013). Literary studies can thus work against the reproach that its generalisations are based at best on insufficient data, and at worst on mere intuition. Building on the often overlooked, but well established philological technique of comparing parallel passages, we wish to demonstrate how, where, and to what extent, the corpus technology offered by the digital humanities can help to empiricise literary studies. Corpora offer, in the first instance, the possibility of qualitative comparison of verbal parallels, but also to make parallels of content in the form of intersubjectively explicable, repeatable search procedures more transparent (cf. Fricke 1991, 2007). In this respect, the comparison of parallel passages, an old established hermeneutic method can be made empirical.

In a further step, we will discuss the possibilities of quantitative comparisons in corpora (i. e. hypothesis-led variables oriented comparisons): on the one hand, the statistical description of corpora through stylometrics, which allows texts as a whole to be described, for instance in terms of word and sentence length, or the frequency of specific graphemes; on the other the analysis of collocations and the determination of »usuelle Wortverbindungen« (common multi-word expressions), which allow for the study of individual textual characteristics. In this connection, we discuss the necessity and usefulness of comparative corpora for the scope of statements determined via corpus analysis, as well as the dependence of the quality of the comparison of parallel passages on the quality of the chosen corpus.

To what extent literary studies as a field will adopt these statistical comparative techniques as a philological method in the age of the digital humanities, remains to be seen. We are, given the aversion to statistical matters which this predominantly hermeneutically oriented discipline has shown to date, somewhat sceptical. We are also sceptical about whether corpus linguistic quality standards of corpora composition will be accepted. We would therefore consider not only statistically based procedures for composing corpora, but also other means of plausibilization, such as the explication of the texts studied, and an argument for their selection, to be not only legitimate but appropriate.

Despite the field of literary studies' continued reluctance to use quantitative methods, we still see a possibility that quantitative textual comparisons could provide a stimulus to standardisation. Corpus based comparisons make us aware that the comparison of many texts presupposes explicit assumptions about the comparability of what is compared. This requires a precise formulation of the questions to be explored, as well as a precise explication of the textual phenomena studied, so that exact statements about the relationships between the characteristics compared become possible.

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