New Directions in Digital Modern Languages: Introduction

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the editors introduce the Digital Modern Languages Special Collection that results from an open call that sought out new and emerging research at the intersection of Modern Languages and digital culture, media and technologies. They explain the intentionally wide-ranging and transdisciplinary scope of the Collection, which reflects an openness to the many ways Digital Modern Languages research is practised. The Collection also includes research on a wide range of geographical and linguistic contexts, reflecting wider calls to move beyond the limited range of languages traditionally associated with "Modern Languages". Through this combined transdisciplinary and cross-languages focus, the Collection seeks to contribute to the broader strategic identity transformation of the wider field.

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It is now over two years since the Digital Modern Languages section of Modern Languages Open was launched with two Special Collections: one offering "self-learning online tutorials exploring critical pedagogies in Modern Languages" (Spence and Brandão) and the other our official launch issue, which set out how we hoped this section would "bring together and expand research that engages with digital culture, media and technologies in relation to languages other than English" (Spence and Wells). New factors, such as the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and questions raised by the recent public access to Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) tools, have added to an already complicated panorama for Modern Languages. Following these developments, this is one of three Special Collections planned to showcase emerging research and to address areas that the section editors felt were of strategic interest in the field. The overarching objective of the section remains to investigate how digital media, methods, platforms and spaces transform – or are transformed by – multilingual and transcultural studies and practices.

This Special Collection is our first issue created through an open call for submissions, and the two section editors, Spence and Wells, were delighted to invite Elmaz and Huc-Hepher as guest editors in order to expand the linguistic, cultural and research expertise in the editorial team. In our call we invited proposals for articles on a range of topics, such as decolonial approaches to Digital Modern Languages research, digital multi/translingualism, cross-languages corpora, and translation and digital technologies. We particularly welcomed contributions from doctoral and early career researchers, who, despite frequently facing greater challenges to publication, are often closer to new developments in digitally mediated Modern Languages research. As with other collections in this series, we were keen to avoid privileging particular linguistic and cultural perspectives, and to attract submissions relating to non-European and/or minoritised languages.

The call for proposals was sent to numerous professional associations involved in Modern Languages and languages-related Area Studies research, in addition to being publicised on the mailing list associated with the Digital Modern Languages seminar.[1] Submission involved a two-stage process: authors first submitted short abstracts for consideration for the Special Collection, and successful applicants were then asked to submit their formal manuscript.

Overall, the editorial team were extremely impressed by the quality and breadth of proposals received (43 in total), which appeared to evidence how Digital Modern Languages research was expanding beyond the "marginal position" noted in our Launch Issue.[2] Particularly notable were the high number of proposals from doctoral and early career researchers, confirming their role at the forefront of advancing languages research in new and exciting directions. While giving hope for the health of the field, the valuable contribution of these researchers serves as a reminder of the vital importance of ongoing work to support the future incorporation of these new and emerging researchers into more permanent roles in Modern Languages. In particular, while often foregrounded by funders, the types of trans- and interdisciplinary research exemplified in this Collection do not always fit easily within existing academic and publishing structures. As editors, we were highly conscious of these barriers, and an openness to the many different ways Digital Modern Languages research can be interpreted and practised guided our thinking when reviewing the proposals.

These concerns further informed our approach to coordinating the peer review process, in which we sought reviewers with a breadth of distinct expertise, and ideally experience of working at the intersection of different disciplines. We would highlight here, however, that securing peer reviewers for all of the articles was a complex process, requiring as it does highly interdisciplinary expertise in often apparently disparate fields as well as specific linguistic and cultural expertise. It is hoped that as the field continues to expand, this process becomes less challenging, but we would like to express our sincere gratitude to those reviewers who so generously shared their time and expertise in the interest of strengthening and advancing this field.

While inevitably the submissions received at least partly reflect the networks of the editorial team, they do offer a snapshot of current strengths and trends in Digital Modern Languages research. In this respect, it is notable how, as also noted in our launch issue, digital culture

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1   https://digitalmodernlanguages.wordpress.com/.

2   A recent survey of UK-based languages researchers by Harrison and McLelland appears to confirm this trend, with 17% of respondents listing Digital Humanities as one of their research interests.

research in relation to Latin America remains a particular area of strength.[3] The Collection overall has a strong emphasis on contemporary digital culture, and particularly social media research. While it was not our intention to exclude historical digital research, this emphasis does point to the particular research contribution of contemporary cultural studies researchers in Modern Languages to the broader field of Digital Humanities that has had strong representation in historical research. Equally, while Digital Humanities is often equated with computational and quantitative methods and approaches, many of our authors exemplify the continued value of smaller-scale qualitative approaches that build on the existing methodological and analytical strengths of Modern Languages research. We would further highlight the presence of research on a number of languages that do not fall into conventional, narrow understandings of the term "Modern Languages", reflecting both the more expansive ways languages research is now understood as well as how minoritised languages are gaining visibility in the contemporary digital landscape.

To provide more specific details on the articles selected for publication in this Collection, they cover research on Arabic-, French-, Emilian-, English-, Esperanto-, Irish-, Italian-, Spanish-, and Portuguese-speaking contexts, and relate to the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, Europe and South America in terms of geography. Their subject matter is equally widespread but connected to three broad areas: digital archives and memory studies, language use in the digital space, and digital storytelling and literature.

To begin with archives and memory, Seeseman et al. have been developing an Islamic Cultural Archive, a crosslingual database to support collaborative research in English, French and Arabic on Islamic learning in Africa. They discuss the technical challenges of working with primary materials in a range of languages and ensuring that these remain searchable and accessible across different query languages. King focuses on another form of digital archiving infrastructure: the autonomous network Baobáxia that connects the audio-visual archives of Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous communities. Through his analysis, King explores how these can be understood as speculative Black digital territories in Brazil that have the potential to challenge online architectures of social control. Leonard's article is dedicated to an analysis of the digital shift in memory and meaning making in the context of the Internal Armed Conflict in Peru, or what he describes as the *memeification* of remembering. It focuses on the potential as well as the limitations of digital media and platforms to critically engage with recent history in comparison with traditional visual media.

Building further on the potential of digital technologies, Ní Dhubhda demonstrates how digital storytelling can counteract underachievement in the Irish-language classroom by applying the innovative TALES (Technology, Activity, Language Learning, Engagement and Story) framework. Through creative writing and digital recreation activities, this approach engages students in communicative, creative and meaningful Irish-language experiences. Evans analyses how our ideas of the "poetic" and "literary prestige" have been challenged and affected by the rise of social media. The article focuses on the prominent Spanish-speaking online poet Elvira Sastre and positions Instagram poetry (*Instapoesía*) within contemporary Spanish literature by critically negotiating views on the literary merit of digital poetry and its relationship with metrics on social media.

Moving on to language use in the digital space, Hampton compares attitudes to the use of Emilian (as spoken in the Modena province of Italy) and Esperanto online. Through the analysis of two rap songs in these languages uploaded on YouTube, she explores the subjects of identity construction and language activism in minoritised language contexts. Guided by a digital ethnographic sensitivity, Carpenedo also explores community identity construction through the study of the translingual online spaces created on the Facebook pages of Brazilian food outlets in the UK. In a glimpse of the future, Alsayed surveys Extended Reality (XR) technologies and their use in studying language. He discusses the potential of combining virtual linguistic fieldwork, communicative event reconstruction and embodied corpus compilation for linguistic research.

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3   When reviewing the proposals for inclusion in the collection, while we sought to select proposals that represented a range of languages, geographical regions and research areas, our primary criterion for inclusion remained the quality of the proposals received.

Building on this rich Collection of articles and as we look to our own future, fundamental changes to the identity of Modern Languages of late[4] raise questions over our own section name of "Digital Modern Languages". In an effort to contribute to the decolonisation of the discipline (see Ford and Santos), the notion of "modernity" – loaded with positivist, imperial nuance – is gradually being replaced across HE courses more generally. "Languages" alone, in its broadest sense, including living, dead, minority, majority, trans, written, spoken, signed or sung iterations, is an all-encompassing term that captures the inherent openness and fluidity of our discipline (Phipps). While the breadth of languages included in this Collection is an encouraging sign, we are committed to working towards covering an even broader range of languages and geographical regions in future submissions. Ongoing work is also needed to strengthen the connections between decolonial and digital research in Modern Languages, with a need to further explore the close intersections between the digital, decoloniality and languages in contemporary culture and society (Whose Knowledge et al.).

Equally, as this Collection demonstrates, while we are committed to foregrounding digital research through and about languages other than English, our research is not solely focused on language but addresses broader societal and cultural concerns. As languages and cultures researchers, we bring a critical, transculturally aware perspective to the digital, itself embroiled in debates over equality, equity, diversity and inclusion due to the biases locked into digital technologies and the underlying commercial stakes involved. Should we too, then, dispense with the "modern" and instead draw attention to our critical and cultural sensibilities, and to our intrinsically inclusive ethos? Could "Digital Living Languages" or "Critical Digital Languages and Cultures" be more apt designations?

In our coming "Digital Modern Languages" events, this decolonial, identity-related issue is one of the questions we will be exploring. Another, as mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, is the urgent question of GAI in our Languages teaching and research. Some apprehend the advent of GAI technologies as a threat, against which universities should build defence mechanisms. Others approach GAI as a tool, offering exciting new pedagogic, investigative, creative and organisational possibilities. Languages and cultures researchers are comparatively well-placed to respond to such digitally motivated threats and opportunities, because we have faced them before. Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) software and increasingly sophisticated Neural Machine Translation (NMT) tools, notably Google Translate, have long cast doubt over the ongoing relevance and usefulness of human translation skills and courses. Yet the field of translation and interpreting has adapted and continues to prosper, and the intercultural skills required of language scholars have rarely been in more demand. This agility in the face of perceived danger should put digital languages and cultures researchers in good stead for the future storms we will undoubtedly weather, be they technical or political.

As this Collection illustrates, the creative ways in which we have responded to digital challenges in the past place us in a strong position for the future, and one that should be shared beyond our discipline. Far from being foreboding, the relationship between the digital and languages should be approached as a symbiotic one, and one from which other disciplines can learn. This Special Collection bears witness to the fruits of this productive, mutually beneficial inter- and transdisciplinarity and seeks to contribute to the broader strategic identity transformation of the wider field.

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4   In the UK, the Institute of Modern Languages Research and the University Council of Modern Languages have been renamed the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies and the University Council for Languages, respectively.

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