Document /in/g Transit

Final Symposium of "Writing Across Borders" (COESO Pilot 5)

Bonn, Bad Godesberg, November 21-22, 2022

This symposium unites transcribers, machine-learning "trainers" and scholars working with (mostly handwritten) ego-documents (letters and diaries) written in time of transit with a strong focus on forced migration in the 1930s/40s.

Drawing on the current research of the participants, we will discuss, on the one hand, external aspects of the documents such as materiality, scripts, languages and genre. Evaluating these features beforehand is crucial since they impact the applicability and quality of machine learning technologies. On the other hand, shifts, breaks, as well as continuities in themes, tone, and style across time and place are highly significant for the source interpretation. Despite recent advances in "Distant Reading" techniques, individual close reading is likely to retain its central role within a hermeneutics of increasingly digitally available sources. Thus, we want to find solutions that allow to read at scale, that is, to zoom in and out of platforms.

We will proceed with a hands-on session to get acquainted with the technical means of automatically transcribing handwritten documents. In addition, we will discuss the costs and gains of "deep" digitization to address the following questions: Can the benefits of extensive transcriptions justify the high amount of manual labor still needed? Are their alternative approaches for working with digital methods on our corpora, for example, by focusing on already existing metadata instead of missing full texts?

Throughout the workshop, we will return to the question "How, with whom, and for whom do we read our sources?" Collaboration with citizens as well as introducing new technologies might both point towards innovative new ways of doing traditional source-centered research with the potential to relate historical with contemporary perspectives on migration.

Schedule
November 21

13:00-15:15
"Hands, Scripts, Languages and Genres"
Rich round of Introduction based on the documents we are working with (5-10 min/participant)
Sarah Hagmann: "Letters of Transit. Sources from German Jewish Refugees, 1930s-1940s"

15:15-15:45 Coffee break

15:45-17:30 Daniel Burckhardt: "Handwritten Text Recognition Technologies for (Semi-) Automatic Transcription: Between Theory and Practice (Transkribus Lite)"

18:30- Joint Dinner

November 22

9:00-11:00
Lena Dunkelmann: "Gruß und Kuss. Transcribing Love Letters with Citizen Scientists"
Gerben Zaagsma: "Full-Text vs. Metadata. How deep must we go?"

11:00-11:30 Coffee break

11:30-13:00 Closing Discussion: "Recurring Topics, Preliminary Answers, Blank Spots"

Participants
Kelly Achenbach (MWS Bonn, COESO)
Daniel Burckhardt (GHI Washington, Writing across Borders)
Lena Dunkelmann (Universität Koblenz-Landau, Projekt "Gruß & Kuss")
Sarah Hagmann (Universität Basel, Departement Geschichte)
Denise Jurst-Görlach (Universität Frankfurt, Buber-Edition)
Emily Kuehbauch (GHI Washington, Digital History)
Simone Lässig (GHI Washington, Director)
Mátyás Mervey (New York University, History Department)
Gerben Zaagsma (Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History)