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Is Digital Humanities a Field? – An Answer from the Point of View of Language

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This article reflects on the way apparently low-level linguistic variances in the way scholars write about the “digital humanities” point to overarching conceptual issues relating to the “DH” field. Is digital humanities a disciplinary field? Is it unified enough to be one? Should it be? These are some of the questions related to discipline formation and professionalization that digital humanists have recently asked. The unstable mix of grammatical and stylistic usages they employ to discuss their field represents their divergent answers. Currently, their linguistic usage seems to signal a trend toward a unitary sense of field. However, that sense is still being inflected by the larger conversation that the digital humanities field is having with overarching and neighboring fields of humanities scholarship with cognate linguistic usages.

Keywords: digital humanities, DH, disciplinary fields, humanities and arts, linguistics, grammar.

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Over the past few years, I have wrestled with a set of low-level linguistic problems when publishing essays about digital humanities research and teaching in English-language scholarly journals and books. These problems may be put in the form of two questions: is the noun phrase *digital humanities* treated as singular or plural? And should we crown the phrase with the definite article (*the digital humanities*)?¹

Of course, these are prosaic questions. But the issues they represent have the unsettling habit of showing up in the most prominent places, such as in the title of an essay I published a few years ago in *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*) to explain

[the] digital humanities to the journal's general audience of literature and language scholars (Liu, 2013b).² The title of the piece as submitted was “The Meaning of Digital Humanities.” But the copy editor added the definite article, and the title as finally published was “The Meaning of *the* Digital Humanities.” Nor is it just in prominent places like titles that such issues arise. Usage problems related to definite and indefinite articles, subject-verb concord (do/does *digital humanities* take the verb *are* or *is*?), and so on are sprinkled throughout writings on [the] digital humanities both in scholarship and in popular discussions.

For example, some writers split the difference between plural and singular uses of

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digital humanities by simply ignoring the need for subject-verb concord. “Digital Humanities is not a unified field but an array of convergent practices that explore a universe,” the scholars behind the “Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0” proclaim in a wonderful piece of verbal legerdemain at once repudiating the notion of “a unified field” and affirming it through the singular verb “is” (Schnapp, Presner, Lunenfeld, et al., 2009). Similarly, the Wikipedia article on the subject begins, “Digital humanities is an area” (Wikipedia contributors, “Digital Humanities,” 2015).

Other writers adopt linguistic tricks that work like a Russian matryoshka doll to hide the plural inside the singular. For example, almost every digital humanist scholar – especially when writing for an audience of other digital humanists – resorts at some point to the compact acronym “DH.” No matter how many plural senses of digital humanities rattle around inside, as it were, the doll can easily be handled as a singular construction (*DH is . . .*). The many digital humanists who in 2013 participated in the important online discussion titled “Open Thread: The Digital Humanities as a Historical 'Refuge' from Race/Class/Gender/Sexuality/Disability?” on the *Postcolonial Digital Humanities* blog (Koh and Risam, 2013) thus collectively used “DH” 189 times as noun or adjective. Noun uses in the discussion thread were almost all clearly singular in sense (as in the 13 instances of the copular phrase “DH is” and the many other instances of “DH” predicated with a singular verb). Adjectival uses in the thread were also frequently singular (as in constructions such as “DH work,” “DH practice,” “DH scholarship,” and “DH people” that referred to the field en bloc).³ Other ways of compacting the plural in the singular have also been attempted, some quite innovative. The article abstract at the start of one of Patrik Svensson’s important essays in *Digital Humanities Quarterly* thus begins, “The

digital humanities is increasingly becoming a ‘buzzword,’” implying that *digital humanities* can be used as a single compound word (Svensson, 2010). Perhaps most interesting is the book by Burdick et al. (2012) titled *Digital_Humanities*, where the underscore character in the title joins the words in imitation of a function name in a programming language. The implication is that “digital_humanities” can be called as a standalone function into a scholar’s intellectual program.

While no one to my knowledge has yet assembled a systematically representative collection of writings about [the] digital humanities for corpus linguistics study, it is a good guess that fuller text analysis performed on such a corpus would find a variety of mixed usages – definite articles and no articles, singular and plural constructions, acronym and full phrase, etc. The right analogy is probably not to Freudian slips of the tongue but to the telltale frequencies and patterns of seemingly trivial words that can prove so revealing in forensic textual analysis.

The reason such low-level usage issues deserve attention is that they likely say more than we know about the ongoing, vigorous discussion of disciplinary identity among digital humanists – that is, the discussion, or discussions, that turn around the kernel question: is/are [the] digital humanities a *field* or *fields*?⁴

One verbal tactic related to those mentioned above is thus especially worth thinking about. For both authors and their copy editors, there is a strong, sometimes irresistible linguistic pressure to resolve usage problems by reconstructing sentences so that the noun phrase *digital humanities* is altered to *the digital humanities field* (or *area*). This superbly convenient tactic subordinates the conceptual issue of the “fieldness” of [the] digital humanities to stylistic felicity. Converted from independent noun phrase into a modifier of another noun (*field*) that

is unambiguously singular, *digital humanities* can be talked about as a well-behaved singular entity.

Such is indeed a “tactic” as I termed it or, to use my earlier vocabulary for similar devices, a “trick,” “legerdemain,” and so on. But, of course, language is not as shallow as that, not even on its tricky leading edges of instability and innovation. Such leading edges – also called in English *cutting edges* and sometimes *bleeding edges* – may seem to be thin innovations with little linguistic substance behind them. But they are actually salients extruded from deep linguistic resources and the collective wellspring of ideas they represent. Language – the collective register of many minds, discussions, and controversies over time in all their mixture of lucid insight and obscure ambiguity – is often wiser than any particular mind, discussion, and controversy using the language for immediate goals. My speculation is that perhaps language is telling us something more fundamental about digital humanities scholarship than explicit argument in the field can articulate. In particular, language may be telling us two things, which I state in the form of the following propositions:

1. *Linguistically, and also professionally, digital humanities increasingly behaves as a singular field.* Of course, the precise scope, organization, and nature of the digital humanities⁵ as a disciplinary field are still being shaped through normal scholarly processes (augmented by today's online methods). I mean by normal scholarly processes the academic job descriptions, curriculum descriptions, grant announcements, conference proceedings, discussions on the Humanist listserv (long a central forum of the field [McCarty, 1987-]), blog posts, tweets in the vigorous digital humanities Twitter community, and so on that augment the research literature in constructing the notion of the field. But the more digital humanists talk

among themselves and to others about their work, the more *digital humanities* is behaving linguistically as a collective noun characterized by what grammarians call *singular concord* (taking a singular verb). Efforts to compact *digital humanities* into singular acronyms, compound words, constructions anchored by the word *field*, and so on reinforce the trend.

In this regard, the historical analogy of the word *media* is quite interesting. In Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (originally published in 1964) “the medium is the message” but “Arnold Toynbee is innocent of any understanding of media as they have shaped history” (McLuhan, 1994: 7, 18). The restriction of singular concord only to “medium” in these examples is uniform in the book. But after McLuhan's time (and partly owing to McLuhan's ideas), the plural noun *media* acquired sufficient generality as a unitary concept (no longer just a variety of different mediums) and enough usage among intellectuals and pundits that it thoroughly invaded the domain of singular concord (like the word *data* more recently).⁶ Thus the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes:

The use of *media* with singular concord and as a singular form with a plural in -s have both been regarded by some as non-standard and objectionable. Compare: 1966 K. Amis in *New Statesman* 14 Jan. 51/3 The treatment of *media* as a singular noun ... is spreading into the upper cultural strata (*Oxford English Dictionary*, “Media”).

The disciplinary field of *media studies* originated shortly after, with the usage of that phrase rising sharply in the early 1970s.⁷

Singular concord, indeed, is as good a symbolic name as any for the way the digital humanities is following the trajectory of media studies and similar fields of the 1970s generation into “fieldness” no matter the theoretical, political, social, or other reasons that dispose

many members of the field intellectually to resist the implications of disciplinary and institutional formation (in a manner that in the West is still largely consonant with the after-May 1968 spirit of poststructuralism and cultural criticism). Concord in this sense need not imply consensus; it signals only that members of the field agree to participate in a common conversation or – as happened after similar controversies regarding *theory* in the post-May-1968 era (and likely will happen in the digital humanities) – concur that the conversation has effectively already happened and in future can be assumed non-controversially to be part of the necessary preparation of graduate students training for professional scholarship in the humanities.

2. However, no one community of scholars can standardize the usage of “the digital humanities” or similar field designations. Consider, for example, that my essay “The Meaning of the Digital Humanities” was commissioned by *PMLA* for its “Changing Profession” section with the express purpose – as specified in the invitation letter I received from the journal editor – of helping the “broad audience of *PMLA* understand this exciting – but, to many, daunting – new direction [digital humanities]” (Gikandi, 2012). While writing the essay, I knew I should avoid the acronym “*DH*” because it was too much an insider’s language that would be “daunting.” My copy editor then let me know why from the point of view of the larger scholarly community I should also preface *digital humanities* with the definite article, maintain plural verb agreement with the phrase, and employ the device of referring to the *digital humanities field*. Some of these standard linguistic usages (such as the definite article and the phrase *digital humanities field*) reinforced the trend I have mentioned toward the unification of the digital humanities as a field. But others (such as pairing *digital humanities* with the plural verb *are*) did the reverse.

The larger lesson is that even if the trend in the digital humanities field itself is toward singular concord, some accommodation by this relatively new field to standard usage in other areas of scholarship is necessary to signal its willingness to communicate across fields rather than create a kind of leetspeak (the semi-cryptic argot of digital insiders).⁸ Thus consider the contrast of the older American Studies field that originated in the 1930s and 1940s (Lipsitz, 2015).⁹ By now, it is normative in scholarly discourse to say *American Studies is* (singular concord). For example, the American Studies Association’s “What Is American Studies?” white paper opens with a sentence that celebrates pluralism yet tethers the noun phrase *American Studies* to the singular verb *has*: “In its relatively brief history, American Studies has taken on many different incarnations and identities” (Lipsitz, 2015). Yet it is still not wholly normative to say *digital humanities is* partly because the field is newer and partly because we also do not say *the humanities is*. Though trending toward singular concord in its own intellectual community, the phrase *digital humanities* is still swayed in its use by powerful cognate usages in the digital humanities field’s parent areas of *the humanities* or *the arts*. The phrase *digital humanities* is thus currently stopped just on the brink of crossing over the grammatical Jordan (where McLuhan in his prophetic, Mosaic persona himself stopped) to become *media studies* or *American Studies* in full singular concord.

The internal debates that digital humanists are having about whether “*DH*” is or is not, and should or should not be, a field are part of a larger scholarly conversation bristling with other agendas, urgencies, precedents, and politics. Digital humanists are unlikely to come to clarity about their naming or usage conventions, and about the concepts these express, until they engage in fuller conversation with their

parent fields (humanities, arts, and some social sciences), department fields (history, literary studies, language studies, writing programs, library studies, museum studies, etc.), sibling fields (e.g., new media studies, corpus linguistics), collaborator fields (e.g., computer science, information science), and wider public discourse about where they fit in – which is to say, how they contribute to the conjunction and collision of many fields and their languages.

Neither of the two propositions above dismisses the seriousness of the questions, doubts, and objections that digital humanists have about whether and how their work will be constituted as a field. Taken in tandem, the propositions just mean that the values of pluralism, inclusiveness, openness, informality, collaboration, and others at the foundation of many digital humanists' concerns about the formation of their discipline are a function of the total social-intellectual domain. That larger domain is more like a solar

system with many planets than a single planet acting as if it owned its gravitational field. Or, to change metaphors from astronomy to anthropology, whether the digital humanities end up being spoken of or behaving like a singular field is less important than the inclusiveness and collaboration of the *exogamous* discussion digital humanists should be having with others – humanists, social scientists, engineers, scientists, and the public.

Notes

Thanks to those in the digital humanities Twitter community for their responses and suggestions when I first tweeted a link to my earlier blog post on these issues on 6 March 2013 – especially David M. Berry (@berrydm), Francesca Giannetti (@jo_frankie), Josh Honn (@joshonn), Shawna Ross (@ShawnaRoss), Susan Garfinkel (@footnotesrising), and @Annoici.

- ¹ This article is extensively revised and expanded from a post on my blog (Liu, 2013a). Fitzpatrick (2012: 12) also discusses the problem of the definite article and singular/plural agreement in relation to the phrase *digital humanities*.
- ² Later in this article, I express a decision about whether or not [the] digital humanities can best be treated linguistically as a single field requiring the definite article. Until that time, I place the definite article in brackets.
- ³ While the “Open Thread” edited by Koh and Risam (2013) is extensive for an online discussion, it is still a relatively compact single document. It may thus be easily studied linguistically through such commonly used text-analysis or corpus linguistics tools as Antconc (Anthony, 2015). The concordance and word list views of the latter tool are in this case very instructive. However, mainly because of the small document or sample size, I have not attempted to study the “Open Thread” through topic modeling, statistical clustering, comparison with national or other representative linguistic corpora, and other techniques that may or may not reveal patterns in the understanding of the digital humanities at a higher level of context than words and ngrams. Such would be the next step with a larger representative corpus of writings about the digital humanities.
- ⁴ Fitzpatrick (2012) and Parry (2012) are representative in discussing some of the issues involved in whether the digital humanities should be thought of as a field. Other writings related to the issues I raise include: Cecire, 2013; Golumbia, 2013a, 2013b; Kleinman, 2013; Rhody, 2013.
- ⁵ Here for the first time I use the definite article *the* before *digital humanities* without italics, quotation marks, or brackets.
- ⁶ A fuller examination of singular concord would need to consider long-term, general trends in the way collective nouns evolve in use toward normative plural or singular concord. On this topic, see Levin, 1999.
- ⁷ The Google Books Ngram Viewer indicates that the frequency of the phrase *media studies* in its English corpus suddenly spiked upward beginning circa 1972.
- ⁸ *Leet* or *leetspeak* refers to the use of alternative, faux-technical spellings and abbreviations on the Internet and in other areas of digital culture to create an argot symbolizing membership in an “elite” digital insiders’ community. A common example is *n00b* for *newbie*. See Wikipedia contributors, “Leet,” 2015. While the non-standard usages in digital humanities discourse I have mentioned are not as extreme as leetspeak, the acronym “*DH*” trends in that direction.
- ⁹ This contrast was brought to my attention by Twitter respondents to an earlier blog post I wrote that was the basis for this article (Liu, 2013a).

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Цифровые гуманитарные науки: новая отрасль? – Лингвистическая точка зрения

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В статье рассматривается относительно низкий уровень лингвистических изменений в том, что ученые пишут о “цифровых гуманитарных науках” как о создании дополнительного уровня концептуальных вопросов, относящихся к сфере “цифровых гуманитарных наук”. Цифровые гуманитарные науки – самостоятельная научная дисциплина? Достаточно ли она целостна, чтобы таковой являться? Должна ли она таковой быть? Это некоторые из тех вопросов, которые возникают при формировании и профессиональном становлении дисциплины, которыми задаются цифровые гуманитарии. Неустойчивая комбинация грамматических и стилистических образов, которую они используют при описании своей отрасли, позволяет понять, насколько противоречивы их ответы. Их языковая практика на текущий момент сигнализирует о стремлении к единообразию в понимании дисциплины. Тем не менее это понимание достаточно сильно изменяется под влиянием обширного взаимодействия со смежными дисциплинами гуманитарного образования с родственными языковыми практиками.

Ключевые слова: цифровые гуманитарные науки, ДН (цифровые гуманитарные науки), дисциплина, гуманитарные науки и искусство, лингвистика, грамматика.

Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.
