DHASA 2023 highlights importance of digital humanities for inclusion

By Birgit Ottermann , issued by North-West University (NWU)   26 Jan 2024

A total of nine researchers from the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) participated in DHASA 2023, the fourth conference of the Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa (DHASA) which was hosted at the Nelson Mandela University in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, from 27 November to 1 December 2023.

Under the theme of 'Digital Humanities for Inclusion', the conference aimed to foster growth and collaboration in the field of digital humanities, which is still relatively underdeveloped in some of South Africa's regions. It offered researchers the opportunity to showcase their work and gave an overview of exciting technologies and tools available to researchers in the fields of humanities and social sciences.

"I am very pleased with the success of the conference," says Prof Menno van Zaanen, president of DHASA, and professor in digital humanities at SADiLaR. "The conference was very well attended, and the atmosphere was informal and friendly with a lot of interaction. The presentations received interesting questions leading to nice discussions, but also during coffee breaks and lunches people were talking to each other all the time. My feeling is that the field of digital humanities is really growing, and the community is a very welcoming one."

Prof Van Zaanen opened and welcomed conference delegates on the first day of the conference, alongside Prof Pamelo Maseko, executive dean of the Humanities at Nelson Mandela University.

The keynote speakers were Rory du Plessis from the University of Pretoria ('A unit of data or a human subject? The inclusion of marginalised voices and humanising stories from digital archives); Dr Alette Schoon from Rhodes University ('Foregrounding the human in the time of AI: What do we mean by inclusive digital humanities?'); and Karabo Maiyane from Nelson Mandela University ('Responsible AI in digital humanities practices').

Johannes Sibeko, a lecturer in Digital Humanities at the Nelson Mandela University in Gqeberha, and PhD student supervised by SADiLaR's Prof Menno van Zaanen, was a key member of the DHASA 2023 organising committee.

"I am very happy with the success of the conference," Sibeko says. "We've had to change the format of the conference at the eleventh hour to accommodate some virtual presentations, which had me worried, but it all worked out well with the support of the Mandela University's ICT media services. All presentations went ahead as planned, which was fantastic."

Sibeko gave two presentations at the conference. The first was titled 'Harnessing Google Translations to Develop a Readability Corpus for Sesotho: An Exploratory Study'.

"In short, it aimed to investigate whether there were differences between texts translated through Google Translate and those edited by humans," Sibeko explains. "The finding was that the texts exhibited similar levels of readability. There was much interest from the audience, especially regarding the meanings of the texts." (Read more about Sibeko's PhD research here.)

A study of YouTube viewers' attitude towards betrayal

Sibeko hosted his second conference presentation alongside Nkazimlo Ngcungca, a Master of Arts student at Nelson Mandela University whom he is co-supervising with Sharon Rudman. The intriguing title of their presentation was 'Unmasking Deception: An Exploratory Study of Viewers' Attitude Toward Romantic Betrayal'.

"It aimed to investigate whether there were trends in the sentiments observed from comments on YouTube. Specifically, we hoped to uncover whether there are different sentiments when a female partner cheats and when a male partner cheats," Sibeko comments. "Our finding was that the sentiments were neutral when both partners cheated.

"The audience was excited by the paper. I received feedback from quite a number of conference delegates after the presentation. One main question from the audience was about the possible meaning that would have been gauged from the dataset if the sentiments were largely positive or largely negative. Luckily, we were fortunate not to have to interpret such findings. We really do not know what that would mean," he adds.

"I truly enjoyed my first time presenting at a conference," says Ngcungca. "Although I was unable to present in person, and had to do so virtually, I could sense the vibrant energy in the room and felt fully immersed in the proceedings."

DH-Ignite

The second day of the DHASA conference was dedicated to DH-Ignite, a regional event hosted by SADiLaR and the Escalator programme aimed at supporting the development of an active community of practice in digital humanities and Computational Social Sciences in South Africa. The event was led by Escalator's programme manager, Anelda van der Walt, who was assisted by Jessica Mabaso, SADiLaR's chief administrative officer. It consisted of panel discussions and short presentations on various topics, including 'SADiLaR's role in digital humanities capacity development in South Africa' and 'Where to learn new skills' (presented by SADiLaR's Mmasibidi Setaka, and Andiswa Bukula and Rooweither Mabuya respectively).

"It was a great opportunity to for DH-Ignite to be held with DHASA," says Van der Walt, "as one of the objectives of the Escalator programme, of which DH-Ignite forms part, is to grow a more active community of practice in digital humanities and Computational Social Sciences. By partnering with DHASA we could introduce DH-Ignite participants to a bigger community that included people from their region (like other DH-Ignites have done) but also from other regions in South Africa and beyond.

"We were really excited to see the level of connection between researchers and librarians that happened at the conference. Libraries and other environments like IT and the Research Office are essential partners in digital humanities because they often offer services, infrastructure, and training to researchers and students to help with digital and computational aspects

of projects," she adds.

Tutorials on Autshumato, NLP, digitising textual data and boosting text searches

The final two days of the conference were dedicated to tutorials based on four different topics:

In the first tutorial, Laurinda van Tonder from the University of Johannesburg gave an introduction to the Autshumato Integrated Translation Environment (ITE). Autshumato is a collection of open-source translation tools that researchers can use on their own laptops.

In a parallel session, Dr Laurette Marais from the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and Prof Laurette Pretorius from the University of South Africa (Unisa) hosted a tutorial on 'Modern rule-based Natural language processing (NLP) for the South African Bantu languages'. NLP is a branch of artificial intelligence (AI) that enables computers to comprehend, generate, and manipulate human language.

On the final day, SADiLaR researchers Dr Benito Trollip and Rooweither Mabuya hosted a tutorial on the digitisation and preservation of textual data, while Prof Menno van Zaanen hosted a parallel session on the topic of boosting your skills to search (and more) in text.

"We explored how searching words in a text works," Van Zaanen says about his tutorial. "First, we looked at how a computer searches (by comparing letters) and the different approaches this could take. Next, we examined the limitations of searching for exact queries. I introduced regular expressions, which allowed for more complex searches, for example searching for any digits in a row, which could indicate a year," Van Zaanen explains. "We then practised writing these regular expressions and briefly explored how one can convert textual data in other formats, using complex search and replace."

The very productive five-day conference was concluded with the annual general meeting of DHASA, chaired by Van Zaanen.

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