

The Impact of Electronic Publishing on the Academic Community

Session 7: Supplementary papers

From the book to the electronic edition of literary texts

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The first and still most popular method for producing electronic editions of literary text, of which there are now a large number in absolute terms but still rather few in comparison with the production of books, past and present, is the effort to reproduce the immediate physical aspect of the printed books by means of the electronic devices now available, in particular the cathode-ray-tube screen, which is the heir of the old listing printout or the teletype printer, the system of which is still at the base of the encoding standards (ASCII, etc.).

This approach presents many inconveniences, of which the principal seems to be the difficulty of doing linguistic and other scientific analysis of texts produced in this way; but the one which concerns me here above all comes from a theoretical consideration of the process. This is what I try to discuss in this paper.

I start from the observation that the printed book has so far been the only possible means to disseminate the literary production, and was itself the heir of the manuscript, which initially it simply tried to imitate. Therefore many features which the book necessarily had are taken as a matter of course, without asking whether they might be different under different circumstances, viz. new systems for communicating the text which it contains. In fact, the material production of the book conformed to exigencies dictated by its support, namely the paper, whereas electronic devices will produce a totally different environment. This is evident especially in the recent trend of hypertext production, etc. Is it advisable to try and avail ourselves of such different situation and textual organization to disseminate, that is, publish (also) the literary texts produced in the past? And, if so, how?

To answer such questions one should take into consideration the definition and essence of the 'text', not in order to define it *per se* but to bring an awareness to the distinction between the text

as a conceptual entity, that which exists in the mind of the author, or of the reader, and the text as it is represented, or we might say 'materialized' by means of a physical support.

As a physical (material) support we do not mean only the paper, but also the air (for the voice). Therefore we are reminded that a thorough consideration of the problem 'text' should include the procedures of scripture, language (spoken or written) and, before all this, of message. We may say that the first existence of a text, e.g. in the mind of the author, is something immaterial, probably also not yet a message; and secondarily it becomes a message, but also not yet a material entity.

It is in order to convey the message to other people that the author produces a material representation of the mental message, through voice or scripture (or otherwise). To obtain this material representation it is necessary to have a set of material entities (e.g. airwaves shaped in different ways; or different signs on paper --- the glyphs); but also a competence which dictates how to organize those material entities. This competence is what is called the language.

The relationship between language, speech and script is very complicated, as everybody knows. But unfortunately people tend to forget all this when they transport written texts on to an electronic support, and simply tend to reproduce the elements of writing as such, or rather to place into the electronic support some codes which eventually become the equivalent of the writing elements on a screen or on paper.

One should remember instead that the signs of writing have very different values, of which I shall mention three cases: the letters of the alphabet, the so-called diacritics and the disposition of the signs on the page, which is in itself an important feature of writing. Everybody pays attention to the alphabetic signs; but the same is not true for the two other elements. They are not part of the same level of representation of the text. For instance, they are often used to make (more) explicit the connotations of the linguistic representation of the text, and are easily understood by the human intelligence, but not by the analytical possibilities of the computing devices.

Simplifying an otherwise very complicated matter, we might say that script has made it possible for the authors to express both the denotations and the connotations of language in one text through the main feature of the traditional writing support, viz. stone, tablet, papyrus, parchment and finally paper. This main feature is to possess two dimensions: so that the meaning of the individual letters may also derive from their reciprocal position and dimension, their shape, and also from other signs which accompany them, or ornaments, etc.

If we see the electronic editions of literary texts simply as another way to obtain a visible object like a book, there is no problem in what I have said until now; but if we consider the electronic editions as a powerful means of producing some automatic analysis of texts, we must reduce the different levels of the reproduction of the text which exist in the printed objects to one level. We must also find a way of obtaining from the one dimension of the electronic support the same possibilities of the bidimensional environment, typical of manuscript and print. In other words, we must make explicit the meaning of all the components of the printed object.

A letter will be a letter [but what about their use as numbers, as in a list: (a), (b), (c) ?]; but a dot has a number of meanings which would generally be lost if we do not encode them in as many elements. And the same may be said for the meaning of the beginning of a new line or of the centred strings, the small capitals, the different fonts, the quotations, etc.

I believe that an important task of meetings like the present one may be to draw the attention of scholars to these problems, in order to avoid waste of effort in planning and executing editions of electronic texts. It should be realized that it is not simply a question of being able to reproduce as a final object the same appearance of the products of printing, but to recognize and make explicit the meaning of all the features of the printed page, and to store each of them in the electronic support.

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