Studying International Variations in Culture and Literature: Visualizing Translation Variations in Shakespeare's Othello

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The evolving Web continues to provide us with new opportunities to study and understand the many different forms of culture, art, and society; across the world, and over time. We are embarking on a project to use recent developments on the web, such as Linked Data and Social Computation, to study both culture and literature, and how each can reveal insights into the other.

Being a global icon, Shakespeare's plays have been translated into more and more languages for about 300 years. Also, there are many re-translations to the same language. There are more than 20 translation of Othello into German, for example, and every translation is a different interpretation of the play. These large quantities of translations reflect changing culture or express individual thought of the authors. They build a wide connection between different regions and reveal a retrospective view of their histories. As a starting point for using the Web to study culture and literature, researchers from Modern Languages have collected a large number of translations of William Shakespeare's play, Othello. In recent years, since roughly 2005, we have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of off-the-shelf text visualization tools which can benefit this study. Here we set out to leverage developing web technologies, text visualization techniques, and text-processing tools in order to gain a better understanding of the various translations of the Shakespeare's work. In particular, we intend to learn more about which content varies highly with each translation, and which content remains stable. We would also like to form hypothesis as to the implications behind this variations.

This research is in the very early stages, where we are starting by creating an initial demonstrator to visualize variations in translations of Othello. Following on from this iconic starting point, we will expand our methods to study how this inspection of both culture and literature can generalize to other cultures and different forms of creative and expressive work. In the long run, we aim to show how the increasingly powerful and social web can be used to reflect on culture and society.