Keeping it Simple: Word Trend Analysis for the Intellectual History of International Relations

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Abstract. In my current research on the intellectual history of international relations, I aim to use digital methods of text analysis to explore conceptual content and change in diplomatic texts. Specifically, I am interested in the sub-set of bilateral treaties explicitly related to cross-border cultural exchange – cultural treaties – some 2000 of which were signed in the twentieth century. What methods and workflows seem most appropriate for this task? Our answer thus far has been to keep it simple. Inspired by recent work by Franco Moretti, Sarah Allison, and others, we apply a straightforward form of quantitative word trend analysis, integrated with analysis of metadata about the corpus and tested (and expanded) through full-text searching. By formulating this approach in a specific relationship to the nature of the corpus and the historical questions I want to ask of it, we are able to get quite a lot out of this simple method. In this paper, I describe this approach, share some provisional findings, and offer some methodological reflections.

Keywords: Intellectual History, International Relations, Digital Text Analysis, Cultural Treaties, Methodology.

1 Introduction

The so-called "KISS principle" ("Keep it simple, stupid!") is so well known in engineering, computing, and systems design that it has become a cliché. It seems nonetheless to get forgotten in some work in the digital humanities, where methodological complexity appears to a goal in itself. One recent trend in DH scholarship, on the other hand, has explicitly embraced radically simple approaches, exploring their heuristic value in practice (for example in Moretti and Pestre's analysis of the language of World Bank reports [16]), and in theory (for example as what Sarah Allison calls "reductive reading" [1]). These approaches have been of value to my current research on the intellectual history of international relations. There I aim to use digital methods of text analysis to explore conceptual content and change in a set of diplomatic texts. Specifically, I am interested in the sub-set of bilateral treaties explicitly related to cross-border cultural exchange – cultural treaties – some 2000 of which were signed in the twentieth century.

European states first began systematically to use bilateral diplomatic agreements on intellectual and cultural matters after World War I. In the late 1950s and 1960,

such treaties became a major tool of interstate relations.[1] The growing use of these treaties in the twentieth century appears to reflect a broader increase in the importance that states assigned to "culture" in achieving their goals on the world stage. But what was the "culture" of international cultural relations? What did diplomats mean when they used this term, and how did that change over time? Exploring the textual content of these treaties offers a promising way of answering these questions. Each such treaty required diplomats to agree on what "culture" was, what it could and should do, and to what degree states should promote or regulate it. Taken as a group, these treaties thus offer access to a long-running, transnational negotiation over the role and meaning of culture in international relations. Exploring these treaties as cultural texts, I seek to contribute to (and build a bridge between) the scholarly research on the intellectual history of international relations [3] and in the field of global conceptual history [17, 18], in particular where this explores the role of ideas about culture [5, 23, 24].

Can digital text analysis of the texts of cultural treaties offer us insight into intellectual-historical questions? What methods and workflows seem most appropriate for this task? Working with Umeå University's Humlab, I have been asking these questions. At this stage, our answer has been to keep it simple. Inspired by recent work by Moretti, Allison and others, we apply a straightforward form of quantitative word trend analysis, integrated with analysis of metadata about the corpus and tested (and expanded) through full-text searching. By formulating this approach in a specific relationship to the nature of the corpus and the historical questions I want to ask of it, we are able to get quite a lot out of this simple method. In this paper, I describe this approach, share some provisional findings, and offer some methodological reflections inspired by my experience of conducting this research.

2 Defining the Corpus

We have assembled a corpus composed of the complete texts of all cultural treaties deposited with the United Nations between 1946 and 1972 in English translation. These are signed by countries all over the world, although not to an even degree; that is, some countries account for many more such treaties than others.[2] The UN published the treaties deposited there in book form until the 1990s as the United Nations Treaty Series (UNTS) [27]. The paper volumes have been scanned in and are now accessible through the UN in pdf form (with OCR already applied to the English-language text).

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[1] Cultural agreements are often mentioned in the literature on cultural diplomacy and a few treaties have been the subjects of detailed study [for example, 4, 19, 8, 25], but to my knowledge no historical study of the treaty type exists. For an overview from the perspective of international law, see [10]. On the interwar emergence of the cultural treaty in Europe, see [15].

[2] For example, two of the most frequent signatories of cultural agreements after 1945 were France and the Soviet Union. I conduct a quantitative analysis of various countries' use of cultural agreements in a separate article.

A distinctive feature of our research is the thematic specificity and relatively small size of this corpus (ca. 524,000 words). Unlike digital intellectual history projects that devise ways to explore a theme in a vast and generic text corpus, we need approaches that allow us to make the most of a body of texts about which we know a good deal. A central feature of this corpus is that it consists of treaties already defined as "cultural." They were marked that way by either by their signatories in the treaty titles, or by international organizations, like the UN and UNESCO, that categorized them. We are able to get an overview of this categorization through a separate data source, the electronic World Treaty Index (eWTI) [22]. In addition to giving each treaty a unique ID number and listing metadata (such as the two parties, dates of signature and ratification, and textual source), the eWTI assigns each treaty to a broad category or "topic", and one such topic is *culture*.[3] We have curated this group, for example by adding agreements that had "cultural" in their titles but were classified under another topic heading, and excluding agreements that were specific to one exchange or which outlined implementation of an earlier treaty. But we tried to make no independent evaluation of these treaties' status as "cultural" based on their textual content. The international community's own designation helps us to do the conceptual historical analysis that follows. The translation into English (from scores of different languages) is likewise the work of the UN. While we lose nuances of meaning by using translated texts, this approach allows us to explore developments among a global set of states in what was the dominant language of post-1945 international relations.

Having identified a total set of cultural treaties, we selected texts for this corpus by using the eWTI to identify those agreements that were published in the UNTS. Because the treaty ID assigned to these agreements in the eWTI corresponds to the number under which they were published in the UNTS, we were able to use these numbers in a script that "scraped" these treaties from the UN's treaty website. We then extracted the text from the pdf files into .txt files. Reading a large sample of these texts (using a spell-check function) convinced us that the OCR conversion was of very high quality.

3   Charting Category Content

There are several possible ways to explore the uses and meanings of the culture concept in these texts. One could trace the word "culture" itself and its collocates (something we will also do). Alternately, one could use topic modeling. For example, one might apply topic modeling to a large, unsorted set of treaty texts of all types, to see if a group of "cultural" treaties emerge in that way. One could then identify the features that characterize that subset. Such an approach would be highly impractical, however,

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[3] The list of topics (see [22], appendix A) is broadly the same as categories used by the United Nations, UNESCO, and other international bodies. Poast and his collaborators acknowledge (p. 10) that topic-coding the treaties was the most complex and potentially problematic aspect of creating the eWTI. In my own research using the eWTI, I have used its coding as a starting point, but take responsibility for my own coding decisions.

since preparing treaty texts for digital analysis is quite time consuming; nor would this approach be likely to yield terribly interesting results.

Instead, our approach has been to use the international community's own categorization of a certain group of treaties as "cultural" to design our analysis. The fact that these treaties are already marked as cultural means that whatever we can find out about their specific content is itself a sign of what the label "cultural" was understood to refer to at different times and by different diplomatic actors. (To be sure, one would need to compare the cultural treaties to a non-cultural control group to establish definitively what is specific to these. Yet with a bit of common sense, rooted in some historical knowledge about treaty-making, this need not be so hard.) On this basis, we can explore word trends in the texts to identify defining content features of these agreements. Determining what content that was seen as "cultural" is one step toward identifying the uses (and thus the meanings) of the culture concept in mid-twentieth-century international relations. The twenty-six-year period covered by the corpus is not long, but it includes developments of major relevance for questions of international cultural relations, including the emergence of new postcolonial states through decolonization [29] and the Soviet Union's political and cultural opening to the world through the Cold War "thaw" initiated by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in the mid-1950s [11].

Using a purpose-built word trends tool, we have calculated the top five most frequent words in all the cultural treaties from our UNTS sample signed during that year.[4] The top five words (nouns, verbs, and adjectives) are quite consistent over the whole time period 1946–1972:

> 1947: shall, article, country, cultural, exchange.
> 1956: shall, article, country, exchange, cultural.
> 1966: shall, article, country, exchange, cultural.
> 1972: shall, article, country, exchange, cultural.

This top-five group includes two categories of words: first, words referring to the functionality of a treaty: two *countries* commit to a series of *articles* outlining what they *shall* do. These words are the most common in more or less every type of bilateral agreement. Treaty-making has long been a highly standardized business; the UN publishes a set of "model instruments" offering conventional language for use in treaties.[5] We see some specificity by contrast in the second group of words we can identify among this list, words that specify what the two countries shall do: *exchange* that is *cultural*. And there, of course, is where our work begins. What did "cultural" mean to the parties signing these agreements? Did that change over time, or vary depending on which countries were party to the agreement?

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[4] This tool, which counts words and normalizes the results against the quantity of words, runs on the web-based programming platform called jupyter (see jupyter.org). We identify the parts of speech using the POS tagger from the free, open-source natural language processing library spaCy (see spacy.io).

[5] https://treaties.un.org/Pages/Content.aspx?path=Publication/ModelInstruments/Page1_en.xml

4   Counting for Culture

We begin by asking what fields of activity seem to be included under the heading of "culture." Such fields are likely to be referred to through nouns. Having used a tool that labels the part of speech of each word in the corpus, we can effectively reduce the corpus to a collection of nouns, and then count them. If we look at the 50 most frequent nouns in the corpus, we can readily identify nouns that refer to fields that are, by their inclusion, being treated as cultural. Key nouns that appear in the top 50 include: *art* and *exhibition*; *literature* and *book*; *university*, *school*, and *education*; *science* and *research*; *radio*, *film*, and *television*; and *sport*. These are only thirteen nouns out of the top 50, which I (not the computer) identify as being related to fields that could be meaningfully related to the treaties' designation as "cultural." The majority of the most frequent nouns, words like *country*, *government*, *territory*, and *agreement* refer instead to treaty functionality in a non-specific manner.

That which is cultural in these treaties seems to refer in large measure to activities in the realm of aesthetic and symbolic production (the arts and letters). This corresponds to what one recent overview of the culture concept (by Johan Fornäs [9]) defines as one of its chief meanings: "the aesthetic concept of culture as art […] according to which culture is constituted by the arts as a specific, relatively autonomous sphere, contrasting to other social spheres of society and to other everyday practices" (p. 35). On the other hand, the category used here is clearly not limited to aesthetics: *science* and *education* (and related terms) occupy prominent roles, as does *sport*.

What is "cultural" here, then, is apparently quite broad. But it is also sharply limited, compared to anthropologists' use of the culture concept. What Fornäs [9] calls "the anthropological concept of culture as life form" (p. 25) tends to include legal systems, property relations, systems of sexual relations such as marriage, religion, and food practices, for example.[6] Terms related to these fields are notably absent from the top 50 terms in this corpus of cultural treaties; most are not mentioned in the treaties at all.

Having identified a handful of terms that suggest what was understood as cultural in these agreements, we can then ask if the relative frequency of these terms changed over time.[7] Let us compare *art* to two broad category nouns that do not seem to fit under the aesthetic definition of culture: *education* and *science* (figure 1).

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[6] Fornäs's study summarizes and seeks to operationalize the vast literature on the culture concept's history [for example, 2, 6, 7, 14, 24]. It serves me here as one (of several possible) means of testing the categories I find in the treaties against that literature.

[7] The relative frequency for a word *w* is defined here as the number of times *w* occurs a given year divided by the total number of occurrences of the selected part of speech (in this case nouns) for that year. Multiplying by 100 gives the percentage values used in Fig. 1.
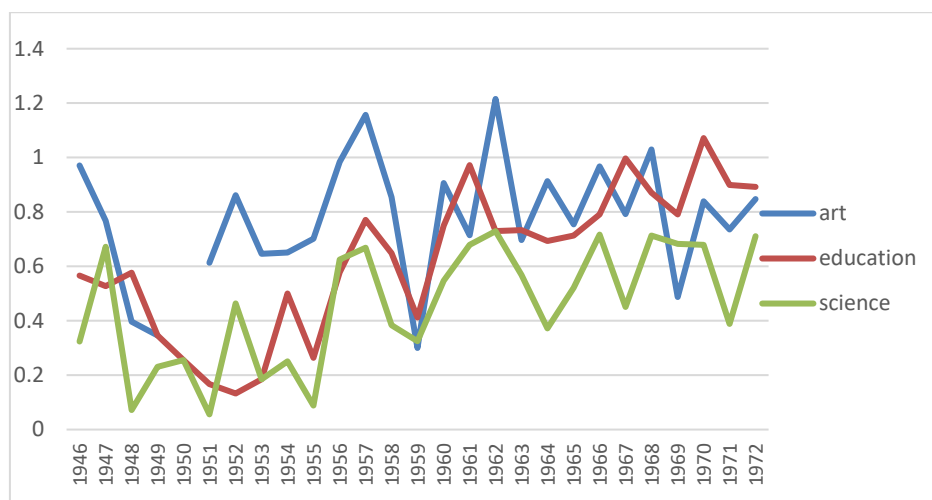
Fig. 1. Relative frequencies of the terms *art*, *education*, and *science* (as percentage of nouns in corpus per year), UNTS corpus 1946–1972.

Looking at the relative frequencies of *art*, *education* and *science* over the period we can make a few observations:

1) There seem to have been two main phases: first, a post-war phase marked by a relatively high degree of difference (spread) among the terms' frequencies and several steep transitions. Then, in a second phase beginning in the early 1960s, all three terms moved closer together, the relative frequency of *education* and *science* rose, and each term found a relatively stable level. This might suggest the emergence of a more or less stable model, a convergence around a fairly similar use of key terms at this point. This is a provisional finding that one could expand upon and test, for example by calculating other measures of internal difference or similarity among documents within the corpus over time, to see if they confirm the hypothesis of a convergence in the 1960s.

2) A second observation is that the term *art* experienced two sharp peaks in frequency. What can account for that? Let us focus on this second observation, as doing so will illustrate a feature of our method. One question to ask in order to interrogate this finding is: were there particular countries that were responsible for this sudden relative increase in references to *art* in 1956–57 and in 1962? We can start by finding out which states signed most treaties during these years. At this point I leave the textual data and return to the treaty metadata in the eWTI. Doing so shows us that of the 50 cultural treaties signed in 1956 and 1957, 21 of these were agreements between socialist states, and several more were between socialist states and countries outside the socialist bloc. No fewer than 16 of these two years' agreements were signed by the USSR. Was a focus on *art* a particularity of the socialist states' approach to bilateral cultural exchange in the context of the Cold War "thaw"?

In order to confirm that it was, in fact, the socialist states' treaties that account for this more frequent use of the word *art*, we can (using any digital text editing software)

search for the word in the entire corpus from 1956 and 1957. This shows that indeed, the treaties of these years that used the word are almost all signed by at least one socialist state. This, I argue, is a finding: that when socialist states, with the Soviet Union in the lead, signed cultural treaties, they defined the cultural to include *art* to a higher degree than had other non-socialist states earlier in the postwar period.

How about 1962? Using WTI, we find that in 1962 only 5 of the 16 cultural treaties signed that year and deposited with the UN were signed by a socialist state (3 by the USSR and one each by Hungary and Bulgaria). Searching the source texts again, we find that *art* was invoked in a treaty between USSR and Denmark, but also treaties between the USA and Egypt, Belgium and Venezuela, and Israel and Peru. Could it be that by this point, the invocation of *art* was spreading, becoming a more standard element of cultural treaties among non-socialist states, as well?

Of course, we can problematize this finding. Some will have noticed that the two peaks of *art* are echoed, at a lower level, by similar peaks in the frequency of the use of the term *science* in those same years. And it turns out (as a word search reveals) that *science*, too, occurred to a higher degree in socialist states' treaties–usually in the same treaties, and often in the same sentences! One example, from Article 1 of the Soviet-Hungarian Cultural Treaty of 28 June 1956: "The Contracting Parties shall develop and strengthen co-operation in the spheres of science, culture, education, art and sports, and shall encourage the development of direct relations between the appropriate organizations and agencies, in order to make known in each country the science and culture of the peoples of the other." Were the socialist powers simply more specific in their treaty-making overall, in the sense that they included more descriptive nouns?

5 The Ideology of *sport*

Whatever changes took place in the relative use of these three terms, all three appeared across the whole period; and after all, *education*, *science,* and *culture* are the three core terms in the name of the UN's own cultural body UNESCO. It can be interesting, then, to look at new terms that emerged during the period. One such term was *sport*. *Sport* entered the top 50 words for the first time in 1956, and appeared regularly for the rest of the period. 1956 was also the year the word *sport* achieved its highest frequency (23rd place). If we (again) toggle from the text analysis to my analysis of the metadata about these treaties, we see that 1956 was also the year when the Soviet Union burst on to the scene of cultural treaty-making (figure 2). Was the emergence of sport as a cultural category the work of the Soviets?
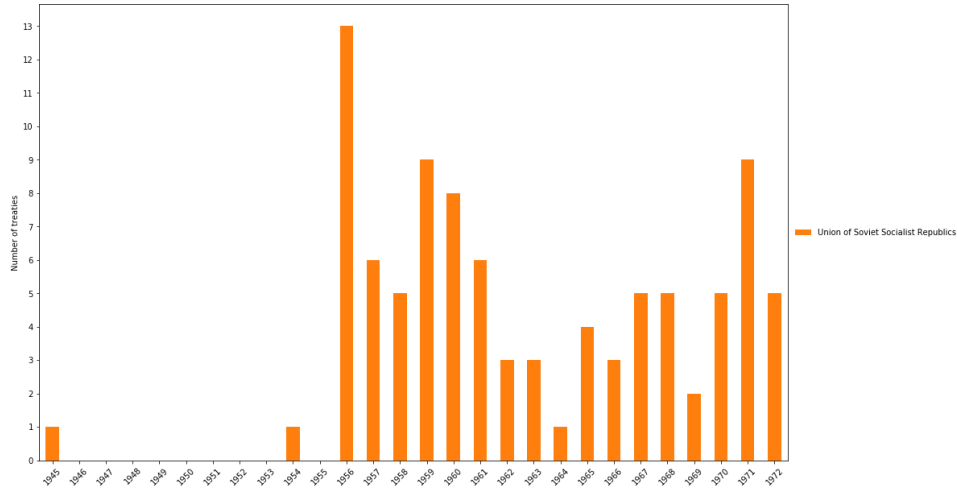
Fig. 2. Number of new cultural treaties signed by the USSR, 1945–1972.

To untangle this matter, we can break up our word trends data by political bloc, creating findings by group that can be compared. Let us check the word frequency of *sport* in the cultural treaties signed by socialist states (figure 3) and, for comparison, in those signed by Western European states (figure 4).
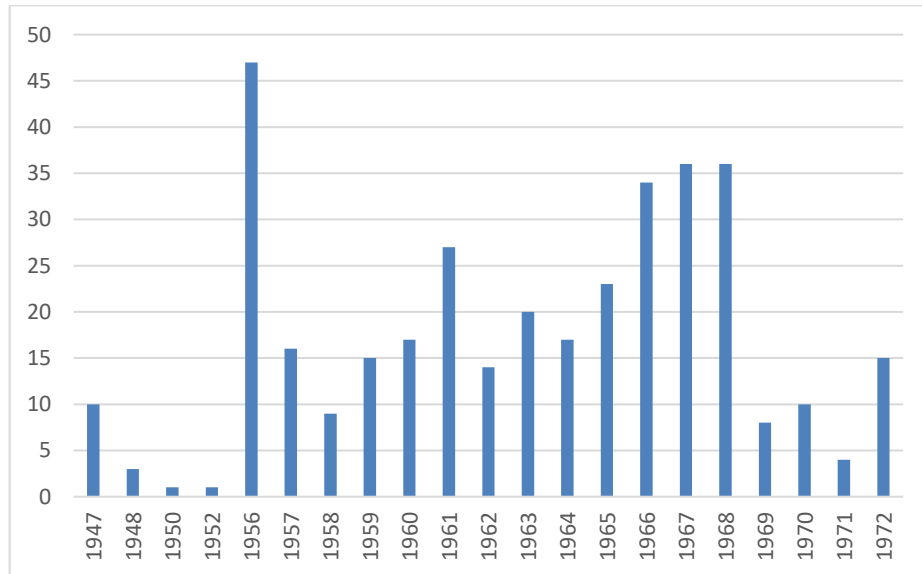
Fig. 3. Count of times "sport" appears in cultural treaties signed by socialist states, by year (UNTS corpus).
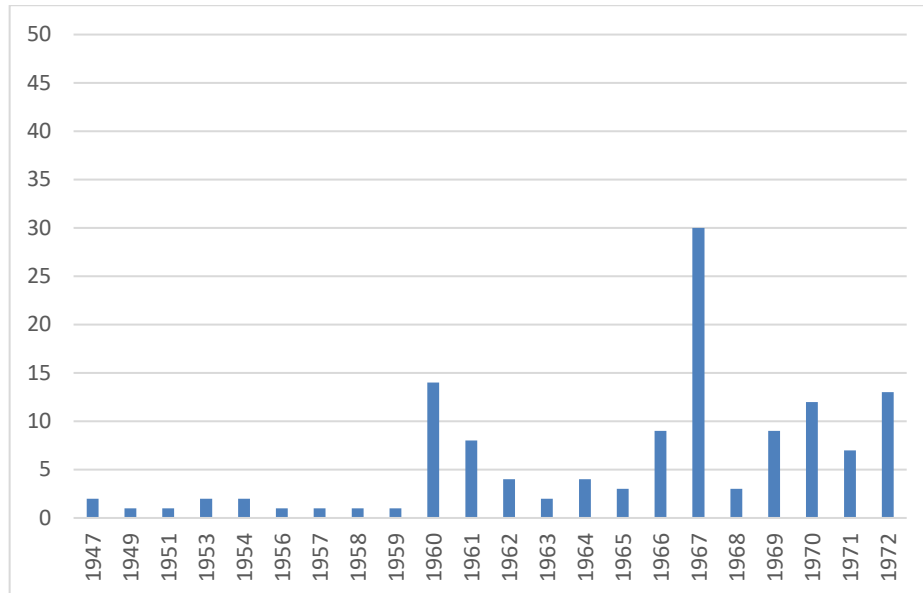
Fig. 4. Count of times "sport" appears in cultural treaties signed by Western European states, by year (UNTS corpus).

Both of these sets include agreements signed between the two blocs, so several treaties are counted twice. Even so, a clear trend appears: The socialist bloc states apparently considered sport to be part of "cultural" relations to a much higher degree than did the western European capitalist democracies. Only in 1967 did the Western European states embrace the term to a larger degree.

Or did they? We can explore the western European states' use of *sport* in their cultural treaties by, again, moving from finding in the quantitative analysis of the textual data to full-text searching, by which we can locate the term in specific treaties. Which agreements, between which countries, were signed in 1967 that included this new emphasis on sport? A search for the word in that year's cultural treaties reveals that of the 14 agreements signed by a western state that referred to sport, 10 were signed with a socialist power. Only in three cases was *sport* mentioned in an intra-Western agreement (like the Danish-French treaty of 15 February 1967), and once in an agreement between a member of the Cold War west and a postcolonial state (West Germany-Guinea, 23 November 1967). With a few exceptions, then, it seems that embracing sport as culture was a trend first established among the socialist states, and later adopted by other countries' diplomats, but generally only when they were dealing with socialist states!

This observation raises interesting questions. Linking sport to internationalism and the promotion of peace was a world-wide movement, and not only the province of Europe's socialist dictatorships [13]. What is the significance of their dominance of that field in bilateral treaties? Was there a particular ideological valence to defining sport as cultural? These questions are, to be sure, derived from highly preliminary

observations. Our observations (and questions) need to be refined, both by applying alternative methods to the corpus – comparing relative and absolute frequencies for all the trends discussed above, for example – and by developing them in dialogue with relevant scholarly literature.

6   Methodological Reflections

By way of conclusion, here are a few methodological reflections inspired by this work so far. First, my work with these methods underlines the importance of the choices I have had to make about how to define and delimit the corpus. It is clear that small changes in which treaties I choose to include or exclude will make a big difference in the findings I make. So justifying those choices is fundamental. Having said that, it is also the case that the findings I hope to make are in any case indicative: I am using computational power for "generative discovery" rather than for strict "justification of an hypothesis" [12] (pp. 33–34).

Second, the method we have developed here echoes recent methodological arguments within the broader field of Digital Humanities. It responds in particular to Sarah Allison's call for humanists to embrace what she calls "reductive reading," using digital analysis to "provide daringly simple approaches to complex literary problems" [1] – or intellectual-historical ones, I might add. The history of the concept of culture – "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language," according to Raymond Williams [30] – would seem to count as a complex problem. Counting words (or, actually, just nouns) is a simple approach, based on a radical reduction of the text corpus in pursuit of an explicitly articulated scholarly question. I think that my findings, provisional as they are, already bear out Allison's point about the potential value of such approaches.

Finally, it may be helpful to think through the approach outlined here in relation to the kind of "iterative text mining workflow" discussed in Melvin Wevers and Jesper Verhoef's study of Coca-Cola advertisements in Dutch newspapers [28]. In that article, the authors offer diagrams through which they seek to "demonstrate how we combined computational and traditional methods in an iterative and transparent manner." In showing how their project moved between n-gram viewers, full-text searching, and "close reading" of newspaper texts, they join what by now is a chorus of voices arguing against a strict distinction between "distant" and close reading.[8] Rather, they argue, the two modes of reading can and must be used together, "constantly mov[ing] back and forth between these modes of analysis" [28].

What workflow have I used here? There are three methods described in this article: 1) quantitative exploration of the corpus, prepared–that is, radically reduced (to just a list of nouns, for example)–with particular purposes in mind; 2) examination of quantitative trends in the treaties' metadata through the eWTI; and 3) full-text searching of the corpus, as a means of validating inferences made through 1 and 2. In the terms established by Wevers and Verhoef, all three are forms of "distant" rather than close

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[8] Wevers and Verhoef cite no fewer than eight scholarly texts that make this argument, a list to which could be added Andrew Piper's recent vigorous arguments to that effect [21].

reading. That title fits well enough for our work with the eWTI, through which we "read" the metadata across several decades. Our use of word trends, however, although a form of abstracted or "reductive" reading, does not seem particularly "distant." The small size of the corpus means that my findings at the level of year-to-year word counts bring us quite close to relatively small quantities of information. On the other hand, while our third method (full-text searching of complete treaty texts) is certainly not "close" reading, it did lead me to find and read revealing paragraphs of text. These in turn send me back to the first method with a new large-scale question to bring to the corpus as a whole, as soon as I devise a quantitative means of doing so. There is, then, an element of iterative switching between levels of exploration that is crucial in enabling such findings as I have been able to make.

What, finally, might be the means of validating the inferences I make here? There may be ways to do this through statistical tests within the source materials, but I plan primarily to do so through further (traditional, non-digital) reading: of archival documents, and of secondary literature on key themes (like the status of art and sport as culture), or actors (like the socialist states in the orbit of the USSR) that our digital explorations highlight as particularly significant (or simply interesting).[9] In the longer term, my hope is that the effort to validate these inferences will lead me onward toward the formation of an explanatory historical narrative, drawing on a rich variety of archival, print, and digital sources, in which I make arguments that are inspired and supported by–but not wholly reliant on–findings made through digital methods. The iterative workflow I am most interested in, I suppose, is one that takes us into and out of the digital humanities over and over again, in a manner that hopefully will come to seem integrated and appropriate, rigorous in terms of quantitative methods while satisfying in the intellectual and even aesthetic terms of the humanities.[10]

Acknowledgements

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[9] According to Piper [20], "reading remains a core tool of validating whether a model captures the theoretical and conceptual frameworks it is meant to approximate" (p. 655).

[10] Ted Underwood makes a related appeal in [26].

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