

Manuscripts and digital tools: the long history of machine-assisted collation

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This paper pursues the history of machine-assisted collation, as part of the larger history of the application of digital tools and environments to manuscripts studies. The first attempts to mechanize the comparison of the texts of manuscripts dates back to the 40's. In the following decades, the process has been progressively automatized using computers, until today, when a number of stable software and other emerging ones are commonly used by researchers.

This paper focuses on two aspects of this history, taking into account the perspectives of both the creators and the users of tools and environments for machine-assisted collation: 1) the integration of collation tools into larger research environments; 2) the sociological aspects of the adoption of digital tools in manuscript studies.

For what concerns the first point, two approaches traverse the entire history of machine-assisted collation: creators and users swing between the enthusiasm for comprehensive research environments including a collation software (e.g. Tustep, TextGrid) and the excitement for modular pipelines composed of various independent tools. Considering the results of endeavours following one approach or the other can be instructive for nowadays creators and users.

The second point –that is, the sociological aspects of the adoption of digital tools in manuscript studies– include the reception of computers by Humanists, as well as the collaborations between Humanists and Computer Scientists. Here again, behaviours, problems and solutions re-occur several times in the history of machine-assisted collation, and are largely still valid today.

The commented history of collation traced in this paper is intended as a contribution to the larger history of the adoption of digital tools in manuscript studies, which offers us insights into the present situation and should contribute to shape the future of digital scholarship.