

Tracing patterns of contact and change: Philological vs. computational approaches to the handwritings of a 18th century migrant community in Berlin

Initiative: "Mixed Methods" in den Geisteswissenschaften?

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Historical manuscripts are an essential source for all humanities. Traditional philology and other text-centered humanities have developed a received methodology of accessing old manuscripts, which involves research on the text-external context, close reading, transcription, critical edition and much time-consuming textological "detective work". While direct support by computer science and engineering through reliable Optical Character Recognition (OCR) tools for handwriting is technically still out of the question, modern image and pattern recognition techniques promise being able to distinguish personal handwritings and isolate pre-defined graphic templates in them. The present project plans on confronting these two methodologies and reflect systematically upon the question which of the two approaches is more adequate and successful in the long run. As a major outcome, an assistance system for accessing historical handwritten texts will be implemented which puts to use the best of both methodologies. The object of study is a corpus of 18th century texts of the small Czech-speaking community of religious "exulants" to Berlin, the (ancestors of the) Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine in present-day Berlin-Neukölln.

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