

Empiricising hermeneutics: the methodological scope of digital text annotation

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Annotation is arguably one of the “methodological primitives” (Unsworth 2000) not only for the Digital Humanities, but for Humanities at large. As a cultural technique it is present in all cultures, and has been of particular importance to those which employ written texts as a mode of preserving, communicating and generating human experience, knowledge and speculation.

In literary studies we encounter annotation in three functional variants:

- as presentational markup (Coombs, Renear, De Rose 1987) which is graphically and systematically integrated into the source text as we read it, via bold or italic letters, underscores, paragraph delimiters etc. Today’s omnipresent digital equivalent of this first type of annotation is HTML which, albeit normally hidden to the reader’s eye, informs a machine how to render the text on screen.
- as genuine text annotation that aims to explicate or interpret a chosen text segment semantically. In the pre-digital context this variant is normally realized in the form of interlinear or text margin based meta-text which relies either on its mere physical proximity to the relevant segment of source text, or uses graphic indexical ‘pointers’ such as arrows, circles etc. to establish a visible link to the text segment to which it pertains. Its digital equivalent comes in two forms: either as an annotation that is digitally inscribed into the text continuum as so-called ‘inline markup’, or as ‘standoff markup’, that is, as a meta-text that is stored elsewhere outside the actual text continuum, but numerically linked to a specific range of letters within the source text via a character count (so-called *offset*).
- as text commentary which establishes intertextual cross-references, creates links to global historical and hermeneutic contexts and enables us to interpret the text on a whole. The traditional form of text commentary is realized in footnotes, in an apparatus or even externally in a secondary text. All three can be emulated in the digital format and will normally add the functionality of a hyperlink.

In my presentation I will focus on the second variant – digital text annotation, and in particular on the affordances of stand-off (external) text annotation as generated with the web application tool CATMA (see <https://catma.de>). I will argue that this particular variant can help us to ‘empiricise’ our hermeneutic activity by not only linking source text and meta-text in a robust and unambiguous way, but also and in particular by post-processing and sharing our annotations analytically and in a combinatorial fashion that allows us to retrace complex trajectories of hermeneutic reasoning.