

# Digital Humanities Case Study

Rachel Mairs

## What is the subject of your research?

I work on a lot of different things, but broadly I am a historian and a linguist and my geographical area of interest is the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and Central Asia. My latest book *Arabic Dialogues: Phrasebooks and the Learning of Colloquial Arabic, 1798-1945* is a history of Arabic language learning in which my focus is on the practicalities of how people learnt Arabic, especially on the role of books and teachers.

## How and why did you get involved with Digital Humanities?

I trained as a papyrologist, and the field of papyrology has always been very forward-thinking in its use of digital tools: databases, online images, digital repositories of texts, etc. I've never \*not\* been involved with Digital Humanities.

## How have you used Digital Humanities methods or principles in your research?

I used social network analysis (SNA) in the *Arabic Dialogues* project because I needed to find a way of visualising connections between large numbers of historical individuals and between equally large numbers of books. The majority of the hundreds of individual teachers and learners of Arabic I wrote about in my book were connected with one another in some way: through pupil-teacher relationships and social relations. Tracing these relationships and the influence these people had on one another – often across generations – was crucial. I also used SNA (the software I used was Gephi) to trace plagiarism between Arabic phrasebooks produced in the period of my study. In a time before (enforceable) copyright laws, many would-be authors of language instruction books simply copied an earlier book. Visualising these 'genealogies' of books in Gephi allowed me to see how books had circulated, and which had been most influential.

In my current project, I use the AI-powered text recognition software Transkribus to help transcribe nineteenth-century German handwriting in archival documents.

## What were the benefits of doing so? Were there any challenges?

Before I started using Gephi, I was trying to keep track of all of this the old-fashioned way, on a large sheet of paper. The move to Gephi was good for organising my thoughts, and meant I could manipulate my data more easily.

## Where can we learn more about your research?

*Arabic Dialogues* is published Open Access by UCL Press: <https://uclpress.co.uk/book/arabic-dialogues/>

### Find out more

- [Rachel Mairs](#) (staff profile)
- [Arabic Dialogues](#) (Open Access book)