

Multilingualism as Infrastructural Imperative: Language Diversity in Digital Knowledge Commons [es] [pt]

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Abstract

Multilingualism has been gaining importance in the digital humanities and scholarly communication, but the infrastructure used to disseminate scholarship has mostly remained in English. Monolingual research infrastructure creates a language barrier for non-Anglophone speakers to access scholarly outputs and reinforces the idea that English is the only legitimate language for disseminating scholarship. Drawing from the debates on multilingual DH and scholarly publishing, we argue that any digital research infrastructure purporting to support knowledge diversity across disciplinary and national contexts must actively work to provide tools to facilitate, publish, and promote research in languages other than English. To show how multilingualism can guide infrastructure development and foster connections with diverse audiences, we describe the translation process of the interface of a research infrastructure, the Humanities and Social Sciences Commons, into four languages: French, Spanish, Bangla, and Portuguese.

Introduction

For more than a decade, digital humanities scholarship has increasingly been conducted across the world, as evidenced by projects like *Around DH in 80 Days*, the Abu Dhabi Winter Institute in Digital Humanities, *Global Debates in the Digital Humanities*, or the *Global Digital Humanities Symposium* series. While DH has tended to concentrate in centers of Anglophone knowledge production such as the US, the UK, and Canada [Fiormonte 2016], the field has long since expanded beyond these countries. Indeed, in response to self-reflexive interventions by critics [Fiormonte 2016] [McPherson 2012] [Galina Russel 2014] [Fiormonte, Ricaurte, and Chaudhuri 2022], the field is now striving to provide a more pluralistic representation of world languages. This groundswell has contributed to the rise of multilingual digital humanities, which involves initiatives to address linguistic bias in digital scholarship; create spaces for debates in languages other than English in conferences, journals, and workshops; and develop digital projects, platforms, and natural language processing resources for multiple languages [Viola and Spence 2024].

Despite these initiatives, digital humanities is in many ways still an Anglocentric field. This persistent reality can be observed in the tendency of researchers to cite sources in English even when they are writing in other languages [del Rio Riande 2022], in the attendance of and submissions to the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) conference [Grandjean 2014] [Bernardi 2025], and the concentration of DH centers in a handful of Anglophone

countries [Fiormonte 2016] [Risam 2018]. While the field is evolving and there are certainly exceptions to each of these examples, DH continues to skew English both in terms of its research and the various infrastructures that shape it.

In addition to Anglocentrism in scholarly venues, for instance, linguistic bias is also present in the digital infrastructure that supports digital humanities work. Critics have drawn attention to the lack of digitized materials [Pawlicka-Deger 2021] and resources for conducting natural language processing in languages other than English [Viola and Spence 2024]. Criticism has also come from scholars working with right-to-left languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu [Ghorbaninejad, Gibson, and Wrisley 2023] who face significant challenges when using digital humanities tools and infrastructures designed to function for left-to-right languages. These linguistic barriers for conducting DH work exist within or in addition to broader inequalities in digital connectivity and knowledge production, which has led scholars to argue that global infrastructural gaps are the main obstacles to forming a truly global community of practice in the digital humanities [Pawlicka-Deger 2021].

To address some of these gaps, [Spence and Brandao 2021] suggest that DH could sustain multilingual infrastructure that facilitates its adaptation to languages other than English and elevate the visibility of non-English tools and scholarship in global DH settings. On a similar note, Élika Ortega previously argued that multilingual publishing venues are needed to foster *zonas de contacto* (zones of contact) that use translation as a tool to reveal “complementariness among practices and common (mis)understandings, as well as, crucially, facilitating the recognition and validation of different knowledge models where needed” [Ortega 2019, p. 182] (see also [Pratt 1991]). Digital humanities communities have adopted translation in conference calls for papers [Grandjean 2014], interfaces of DH project websites [Rojas Castro 2023], and training resources [Quiroga et al. 2024]. However, most of the research infrastructure developed in North America and Western Europe to access, search, and disseminate digital scholarship has mostly remained monolingual and designed for English-speakers.

This issue is present in both commercial and open access infrastructure. On the commercial side, the interfaces of academic social networks such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu are only available in English. On the open access side, the interfaces of databases such as the Directory of Open Access Journals and OpenAlex are available only in English.^[1] This focus on English at the expense of other languages may be completely unintentional or connected to the very real limitations that open infrastructure initiatives often face, including those related to the complicated interconnections between funding, policy, and capacity to take on the work of ensuring that, when and where appropriate, knowledges of all linguistic and cultural backgrounds are free and open. Nevertheless, monolingual interfaces risk perpetuating Anglocentric biases and infrastructural design practices.

When digital research infrastructure does not prioritize multilingualism, it prevents people from sharing or discovering research outputs in languages other than English. This situation creates further barriers to equal participation for researchers whose first language is not English and who already spend more time and effort conducting scholarly activities in English [Amano et al. 2023].

In addition, monolingualism in research infrastructure reinforces the idea that English is the only legitimate language for disseminating scholarship. English is currently the lingua franca in scholarly communication, that is, “a contact language between speakers or speaker groups when at least one of them uses it as a second language” [Mauranen 2017, p. 8]; as such, it can of course serve an important and seemingly necessary pragmatic role, facilitating the intellectual exchange of ideas in circumstances where it might not be possible otherwise. However, the exclusive use of English can also lead to a homogenization of scientific knowledge. This process has been described as epistemicide [Bennett 2023] because scholarly discourses in languages other than English become assimilated to the dominant English to better fit in international journals, dismantling their epistemological infrastructure in the process. The risk of epistemicide is even greater in the humanities and social sciences because they are the disciplines with the largest number of multilingual publications addressing local topics and concerns [Larivière 2018] [Pradier, Céspedes, and Larivière 2025]. For all of these reasons, we argue that any digital research infrastructure purporting to support knowledge diversity across disciplinary and national contexts must actively work to provide tools to facilitate, publish, and promote research in languages other than English. This principle has been the foundation for our own infrastructural DH work, in particular the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Commons, a digital research infrastructure that combines elements of social

networking sites, collaborative tools, and institutional repositories so users can build profiles, share existing publications, create new publications with DOIs and Creative Commons licenses, start collaborative Groups and Projects to share files and communicate, and more.

In the next two sections, we situate our work on the HSS Commons in the context of multilingual digital humanities and knowledge commons. Then, we describe the process of translating the interface of the HSS Commons. Finally, we discuss the challenges encountered in this process and directions for future research.

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Multilingual Infrastructure and DH

Research infrastructure created in North America has mostly been monolingual. However, research infrastructure projects developed in Africa and Latin America show us that this does not have to be the case. AfricArXiv and Scielo, two regional repositories for disseminating and making African and Latin American research more discoverable, have designed their interfaces to include multiple languages through manual or machine translation. While this design shows willingness to connect communities from multiple parts of the world, the task of designing and maintaining multilingual research infrastructure should not fall only to those on the peripheries of knowledge production so they can be in dialogue with scholars from the Global North. If digital humanities in particular seeks to become a global community of practice, then the centers of knowledge production also have a responsibility to develop multilingual research infrastructure where digital scholarship can be accessed and disseminated in multiple languages.

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One example of this kind of much-needed work is *The Programming Historian*, a resource that shares peer-reviewed tutorials for humanists about digital techniques and workflows. While originally developed in English, the project has expanded to include Spanish, French, and Portuguese, with some tutorials being translated and others being created directly in one of these languages. When tutorials are translated, the journal provides guidelines to ensure the translations align with the principles of the journal, such as using culturally inclusive and globally accessible language that avoids vague references to geographical locations, jokes, and jargon [Quiroga et al. 2024]. These guidelines show a commitment to developing clear and accessible translations in DH projects for a broad audience.

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Another recent initiative is the Multilingual DH Network, which connects scholars “using digital humanities tools and methods on languages other than English” through a GitHub organization and mailing list. This network has also created a bibliography on multilingual DH, established a working group in ADHO, and hosted workshops and events on multilingual DH.

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Both *The Programming Historian* and the Multilingual DH Network contribute to the idea that DH is not a coordinated and monolithic menagerie gathered under a single “big tent,”^[2] but rather a complex of scholars and scholarly communities active across disciplinary, institutional, national, and linguistic lines. Seeing DH in these unstructured and inclusive terms, as opposed to a unified field, fosters zones of contact that connect different languages and research traditions while showing how they complement or contrast each other. However, this work has been more focused on conducting multilingual research rather than infrastructure-building.

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Research infrastructures are important for multilingual DH because they are increasingly created and used to access, analyze, and visualize cultural data, and their development is informed by an engagement with certain values that structure and constrain the format of the arguments produced over them [Guldi 2020]. Jo Guldi mentions two principles that guide the values of infrastructure building: bibliographic (consisting of values such as transparency, interoperability, and plurality of humanistic desires) and critical (consisting of the values of community ownership and the belief that the democratization of access to information breeds better democracy). One value that could be added to Guldi’s list is multilingualism to foster connections between diverse audiences, as exemplified by Scielo, AfricArXiv, The Programming Historian, and the Multilingual DH Network.

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While supporting multilingualism requires funding, it can also be sustained by the scholarly community when it is prioritized as a value. For example, Open Journal Systems (OJS), a software and infrastructure that supports thousands of open access journals, has crowdsourced translations of its interface and documentation in multiple languages. OJS is a case of a multilingual infrastructure that supports other multilingual projects, as journals have used this software to

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publish in 60 languages [Khanna et al. 2022].

Multilingualism is an important value for infrastructure because it leads to increased equity for scholars, greater epistemological diversity, and broader societal access to knowledge [Bowker, Laakso, and Pölönen 2025]. Accordingly, multilingualism should be a priority — especially for open access infrastructures; cost is not the only barrier to accessing knowledge. Fluency in the English language can also be a barrier that excludes non-Anglophone researchers from openly accessing and disseminating knowledge.

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Multilingual Knowledge Commons

One form of open access infrastructure currently being developed and leveraged by DH communities is digital knowledge commons, which are online spaces that view knowledge as a complex, global, shared resource [Hess and Ostrom 2006].^[3] This perspective has inspired projects to build digital knowledge commons in the humanities that provide equitable online access to data, information, culture, and knowledge [Rosnay and Stalder 2020]. Initiatives such as Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons, and Knowledge Commons (previously called Humanities Commons) have been used in the digital humanities to openly share scholarship. These projects have goals such as giving “free access to the sum of all human knowledge” [Wikipedia 2025] or cultivating “open spaces for us all to connect, create, share, and experiment [...] to transform global knowledge systems” [Knowledge Commons 2024].

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These aspirations, while remarkable, can conceal barriers of entry: fluency in the English language or, in lieu of that, familiarity with and easy access to translation tools. For example, the English version of Wikipedia has over 7 million articles, more than twice the number of articles in the German version, the second largest Wikipedia by number of articles, with around 3 million. This imbalance prevents non-English speakers from accessing parts of the sum of human knowledge available on Wikipedia. Nonetheless, Wikipedia’s multilingual interface and content are still necessary because around 23% of articles on each version of Wikipedia specifically relate to the cultural context of that language and are not always available in other languages. Therefore, multilingual interfaces encourage local, context-informed online participation in languages other than English.

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If digital knowledge commons do not support multiple languages, then there is a higher barrier to sharing knowledge about the local contexts of each language. Therefore, language should be at the center of discussions on how to redistribute power and authority in the global systems of knowledge production [Pawlicka-Deger 2021]. Otherwise, digital knowledge commons and the infrastructure that supports them risk democratizing only information in English and dismissing the role of language in the production of knowledge, since privileging English can also privilege Western viewpoints and knowledge systems [Arbuckle, Adema, and Ortega 2024] [Bowker, Laakso, and Pölönen 2025].

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In addition to providing online access to culture or information, digital knowledge commons should also reflect on the language(s) forming these commons, especially if they seek to transform global knowledge systems, considering that the use of English in academic publications has decreased from 93.86% of scholarly documents in 1990 to 85.51% in 2023 [Pradier, Céspedes, and Larivière 2025]. While the majority of documents are in English, the humanities and social sciences (HSS) show the highest openness to multilingualism, as 40% of HSS journals are multilingual or publish in languages other than English [Pradier, Céspedes, and Larivière 2025]. Furthermore, around half of the researchers in these disciplines publish in two languages or more [Kulczycki 2020].

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In this context, where multiple languages co-exist in the humanities and social sciences, treating knowledge as a common resource requires that communities “sit down and redefine collectively and dynamically what knowledge(s) is (are) and how each piece of knowledge could be digitally represented” [Fiormonte 2016, p. 452] — including by considering the languages needed to represent them. Therefore, the infrastructure that supports scholarly publishing in the HSS, especially knowledge commons, require multilingual support as one of the values of their design.

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Translating the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Commons

In this section, we discuss our research on — and development of — research infrastructure to support language diversity and community building across linguistic, cultural, and national contexts through the Canadian Humanities and

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Social Sciences Commons [Jensen et al. 2024]. Led by the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) Partnership and coordinated through the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (ETCL) at the University of Victoria, this project is an in-development, not-for-profit hub for open scholarship in Canada and beyond.

The site is already available in English, French, Spanish, Bangla, and Portuguese (listed here in the order in which they were translated). We started with these languages because our team and research collaborators are fluent in them, but also because they are some of the languages with the highest number of speakers and research activity in the humanities and social sciences [Pradier, Céspedes, and Larivière 2025]. As part of this translation work, we interpret multilingualism as an infrastructural as well as a research imperative. This imperative assumes that the larger knowledge commons is a multilingual space that must engage with the infrastructural and social issues that prevent ethical, caring, and diverse ways of creating and sharing knowledge within that space.

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Translating the interface of the HSS Commons makes the site more accessible and useful for anyone who communicates and carries out research primarily in non-English languages. This work aligns with the emphasis the HSS Commons places on connection and open, social scholarship, which allows us not only to address questions of reconfiguring how digital knowledge is represented globally [Pawlicka-Deger 2021], but also to explore responses directly, using the HSS Commons research prototype as a real-life example of a digital commons infrastructure. We are very grateful to the research partners who took on this challenge with us, translating the site into French (Olga Ziminova, University of Victoria), Spanish (Alan Colín Arce, University of Victoria), Bangla (Sajib Ghosh, University of Victoria), and Portuguese (Bernardo Bueno, Elena Savi Frainer, Carina Corá, Franco Guglielmoni, Lorenzo Bueno, and Leonardo Colato, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) — as well as those currently working with us to translate the site into additional languages.

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The translation process begins with the HSS Commons team sharing with our collaborators various files to be translated. Some of the files correspond to “Articles,” that is, pages the HSS Commons team has authored and which can be edited using a graphical Content Management System editor in the site’s backend (e.g., “Who We Are,” “Partners,” “Terms of Use”). Another, larger set of files comprises .ini files, which contain key-value pairs made up of a key or variable name and a text string that is displayed on the website every time its corresponding variable is invoked in the HSS Commons codebase (freely available at <https://github.com/etcluvic/hsscommons>). The following is an example of a variable and how it was translated in different languages:

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COM_ANSWERS="Questions and Answers"
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The translation for the different languages of the site is:

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COM_ANSWERS="Questions et réponses" [French]
COM_ANSWERS="Preguntas y respuestas" [Spanish]
COM_ANSWERS="প্রশ্নোত্তর" [Bangla]
COM_ANSWERS="Perguntas e Respostas" [Portuguese]
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Each page on the site contains at least fifteen variables, with the most complex pages having over 200. However, the text of several variables appears frequently in multiple pages and the same translation can be used repeatedly for consistency. In total, the site comprises 90 pages that need to be translated, as well as 16 “Articles” or pages (as discussed above). In addition, we work with translators to review the site for omissions and errors, providing them with a spreadsheet — also shared with our developers — to record any such instances so that these can be fixed as soon as they are detected.

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While it would be possible to use machine translation or artificial intelligence tools for this process, we decided not to use them because the translations were not always accurate when we tested them, and they sometimes omit cultural and linguistic nuances between different languages. Similarly, while we could simply leave users to rely on browsers’ built-in translation tools, not all users know about or are comfortable using these tools, which can negatively impact how web pages render (and thus negatively impact user experience), and again, like other machine translation tools, they

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can mistranslate important discipline-specific terms and concepts or gloss over crucial nuances, creating additional access and equity issues in the process.

By contrast, working with translators not only allows us to account for the nuances between languages but also to build connections with the local DH communities of each language. For example, the work of translating the HSS Commons interface into Portuguese emerged organically out of past collaborations with Bernardo Bueno, who directs the PUCRS Digital Humanities Laboratory (LabHD) at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and was previously a visiting scholar with us in the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab in Victoria, British Columbia. Bernardo and his local team of researchers and students translated the HSS Commons into Brazilian Portuguese, liaising with Graham Jensen and other members of the ETCL team. This translation project has already fed into related community-building events. In April 2025, for instance, ETCL team members travelled to Porto Alegre to participate in LabHD's inaugural "Digital Humanities Conference," which featured an official launch of the Portuguese version of the HSS Commons, academic talks, university and community meetings, and informal discussion and networking. As part of this event, we introduced conference participants to the HSS Commons, its affordances, and the INKE Partnership's research into multilingualism, platform governance, and other topics. Even so, we are actively working to ensure that the Portuguese translation of the HSS Commons serves not only as a research output, but as the foundation for future collaborations and funded partnership opportunities. At the same time, we are also working with Bernardo to explore options for importing Portuguese-language research into the HSS Commons repository.

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Once the content is translated, we coordinate with developers (Lee Naphthine and, previously, Karan Gosal, Bhavanvir Rai, and Archie To) to add any translated content to our GitHub repository, install the language via the site's backend, and add the newly installed language as an option in the frontend's drop-down menu — which allows users to toggle the interface's default language. Tim Sobie and Graham Jensen also manually duplicate and adapt modules related to the site's menus, breadcrumb navigation, footer, homepage, and more. After we have reviewed and approved these changes on our testing server, we then update our production site.

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Once we have published the translations, we can then assess the effectiveness of the translated versions of the site using interviews, surveys, or focus groups, as has already been done with the English version [Tracy and Jensen 2025]. Assessments of this kind help us better understand scholars' needs for research infrastructure and how the HSS Commons can support their work. In the case of the English focus groups we hosted in 2024, participants highlighted their desires to reach the right academic and non-academic audiences and to have persistent access to the site in the long term. While these are important concerns, more work is needed — on our part and the part of others — to understand the needs of multilingual and non-Anglophone scholars regarding digital research infrastructure.

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Lessons Learned

The HSS Commons is a case study in prioritizing multilingualism in the design of the research infrastructures used to disseminate research outputs that includes the contextual knowledge of speakers of different languages. As the number of multilingual research outputs increases in the digital humanities, there is a parallel need for infrastructure that can support the dissemination of outputs in languages other than English. While our own translation work has sought to increase the accessibility and visibility of scholarship by digital means, there are certain challenges and limitations of this approach that are shared by multilingual projects more generally.

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First, English is the most prevalent language on the HSS Commons, although we are trying to address this by connecting with communities that speak the languages in which the HSS Commons is available and by actively importing the metadata of some non-English publications into our repository. For example, we are importing the metadata of some French journals indexed in *Érudit*, a Canadian scholarly platform. We are also increasing our efforts to introduce the site to Spanish-speaking audiences [Colin-Arce 2025].

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Furthermore, our goal is that the HSS Commons can foster balanced multilingualism, a concept that assumes that "the need to communicate in a lingua franca does not necessarily imply the adoption of a lingua unica" [Balula and Leão 2019, p. 7]. The HSS Commons rejects the idea of English as lingua unica (single language) because it assumes users will want to interact with research infrastructure in languages other than English (or in several languages) for

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convenience, efficiency, or accessibility.

Balanced multilingualism also entails developing “instruments for documenting and measuring the use of language for all the different purposes in research, thereby providing the basis for the monitoring of further globalization of research in a more responsible direction” [Siversten 2018]. Because the HSS Commons provides a space to share multiple types of research outputs and to create digital groups with other researchers, it aligns with the idea of promoting multilingualism in several parts of the research process, not only at the publication stage, where researchers might choose to publish in English with the intention of reaching a broader audience.

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Second, the maintenance of multilingual websites is more time-consuming because it requires updating the site for each language. Some multilingual websites experience long build-times or unexpected errors that prevent the addition of new languages [Quiroga et al. 2024]. In the HSS Commons, we have run into minor issues in our codebase as we have added new translations, such as English-language text strings not accounted for in existing variables (as shown above), rendering problems related to special characters, and previously unknown PHP syntax errors. As we move forward with this work, we are aware that we will also need to update our repository to align with recognized metadata standards that allow for multilingual subject mapping and discoverability.

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Third, digital humanities scholarship published in languages other than English tends to be siloed because it is not usually published in the “international” journals of the field and, when it is, it tends to be disseminated in special issues [Nilsson-Fernández and Dombrowski 2022]. This separation prevents the formation of zones of contact in the discipline because Anglophone DH does not facilitate interaction with scholarship in other languages to identify points of connection or misunderstanding. The HSS Commons avoids this tendency because any publication, regardless of its language, appears in all the translated versions of the site, which does not automatically filter them by language.

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Conclusion

The HSS Commons is an example of a research infrastructure that centers multilingualism as a core value that underpins the technical and scholarly work we conduct. Prioritizing this value is especially important in infrastructure created for the humanities and social sciences because these disciplines do not favor monolingual English scholarship and publication.

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We recognize that the infrastructure itself was developed in — and reflects certain assumptions from — our North American academic and cultural contexts. However, the translation process can make those assumptions visible to examine, change, and reflect on, as previous projects that fostered zones of contact in DH, such as *The Programming Historian*, have done. If the values of infrastructure and the language(s) used to develop it are kept invisible, these assumptions will remain unquestioned and reproduce the idea that English is the default setting in DH research [Dombrowski and Burns 2023]. Through our own work with translators in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts, we have been able to productively reflect on the ways that the HSS Commons might challenge this idea both infrastructurally and through related ongoing research informed by the cross-community relationships we have actively sought out. Current and future research infrastructure projects could benefit from incorporating similar translation practices in their interfaces to build connections with different linguistic communities and reflect on the implicit assumptions of Anglophone knowledge production and dissemination.

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Indeed, we believe that the task of developing multilingual research infrastructure should also fall on Anglophone DH scholars and organizations if they intend to diversify the field. We are committed to continue addressing these challenges by working directly with linguistically diverse academic societies and research groups interested in joining the Commons; ensuring diverse linguistic backgrounds are well represented on the advisory committee and in our partner networks; and continuing to listen to our site members and stakeholders, in Canada and beyond. The key for us is to listen to everyone in the various communities that support or stand to benefit from a research infrastructure that supports multiple languages in the production and dissemination of knowledge as a common resource.

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Notes

[1] A recent study of OpenAlex, for instance, points to this platform's potential to improve linguistic diversity, both in terms of research and the metadata used to describe it [Céspedes et al. 2025].

[2] One metaphor that has gained traction as a descriptor for DH as a whole — but also intersects with ongoing conversations regarding digital knowledge commons — is the “expanded field”: moving away from the “big tent” metaphor used a decade ago to portray DH as a diverse and capacious yet ultimately unified and coherent field, Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold (2016) embraced this metaphor, which they borrow from Rosalind Krauss, as part of a larger attempt to reimagine DH in more unstructured, indeterminate, and inclusive terms. Years earlier, Patrik Svensson also sought to disassemble the DH big tent by reframing it as “a meeting place, innovation hub, and trading zone” [Svensson 2012]. Notably, both of these newly posited metaphors — Klein and Gold’s expanded field and Svensson’s trading zone — resonate with the spatial metaphor of the commons that we invoke in the following section of this paper. For example, like the expanded field of DH, digital knowledge commons and the zones of contact they create are less “big tents” or bounded spaces to be fenced off (or flapped up, as it were) than distributed, deliberately porous, and emphatically social networks; digital commons often function as one data island among — and intentionally linked to — many others. Moreover, knowledge commons in general are also reminiscent of Svensson’s trading zone in the sense that they are, first and foremost, sites of intellectual and often multilingual exchange.

[3] A more detailed discussion of knowledge commons falls outside of the scope of this paper. For more information about the history, theoretical foundations, and digital evolution of knowledge commons, see, e.g., [Winter et al. 2020] [Jensen et al. 2022] [Jensen 2023].

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