Computing Folklore Studies

Introduction

Maps of Science

Discussion

50 Topics

As we surveyed the fifty historical graphs of one hundred years of folk- lore studies, we wondered what could be gleaned. We anticipated that we would see a few general patterns: topics that had declined in interest and topics which had gained in interest, as well as some constants. We were also keen to see if there were any particular peaks or dips or other forms of dynamism among the histories, and we were not disappointed. The five-year means of the fifty topics is perhaps the easiest to see in this regard and returned some interesting results.

While we predicted that topic modeling would reveal an increase at the time corresponding to the performative shift in folkloristics, the five-year means of the cultural performance discourse topic's occurrence from 1888-2012 in Figure 2 shows a clear rise in the 1970s.

Topic 26 "cultural performance discourse"

8 Performance Topics - Graphs

8 Performance Topics - List

The first topic in the list above, topic 21 (does make world), confused us momentarily, but then, following our process of beginning at a distance and then zooming in to understand the nature of a phenomenon, we checked the texts associated with it

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and recognized that the abstraction more familiar with readers would be psychological approaches to folklore.

Drawn into the graphs like this, we felt obliged to explore the peak and decline of interest in psychological approaches, only to realize that our initial topic of interest performance revealed a similar, if not decline, then at least plateau. Scanning all eight graphs we had coded for last quarter activity we saw similar declines and plateaus in all but one topic, topic 9 (cultural political national). On the one hand, this collection of trends suggests that perhaps the psychological and the performative either found some resolution in the political or that focus on the political simply displaced previous concerns.

Trends (no slide)

The other topics clustered into five broad trends, which we came to describe, sticking with our simple, objective schema, as:

first half activity
early peak
middle, or midcentury, peak
constant,
dynamic or outlier.

Constant Trend

26 topics

Dynamic Trends

Our labels for these trends:

First Half Activity: there are seven topics with a great deal of activity in the first half of the period under examination.

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Because neither Western Folklore nor the Journal of Folklore Research are being published during this period, this trend, and the one that follows is a product of JAF's own history. Even the briefest glances through the contents of these topics reveals that these topics represent the great collection projects of the Journal as sketched out by William Wells Newell in its opening pages and as later developed by various members of the Society.

Early Peaks had an early interest that typically declines as quickly as it arose. These topics treat Latin American folklore, including New Mexican traditions (47, 13); Francophone folklore, largely Canadian with some later work in Louisiana (33); and an interesting admixture of tale collections and considerations that span the old and new world (10). Interestingly, the peaks here are contemporaneous, with the rise and fall coming during the interwar years of the twentieth century, circa 1917 to 1942.

Mid-century Peak: Peaking just after these topics, and in the middle of the period being mapped here, are two topics, year western state (00) and california place mountain (30) that can at least be partially understood as artifacts of the emergence of a major new journal in the field, Western Folklore.

The Three Outliers

Outlier: Finally, of the topics showing significant dynamism during the study period, there are three whose behavior could not be readily captured in a short phrase. They are: *good person make*, the lead topic in 425 articles of our corpus; *time told story* in 317 articles, and *form number part* in 299.

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A complete list of the word clusters associated with these topics (Table 4) does nothing to reveal what they are. Just the opposite, they looked frighteningly similar to our eyes. But a look at the texts associated with each topic reveals that good person make addresses folk belief; that time told story is an admixture of jokes, legends, tall tales, and occupational folklore from contemporaneous historical settings; and that form number part encompasses collections of regional folklore, including place names, considerations of diffusion, some examinations of material culture forms, and treatments of myth.

Towards a Better Map of Folklore Studies

Co-Author Map with Projections

The metaphor of the map is a useful one, if only because in this instance the mathematics lying behind the cartography is fairly complex. Here, the map is a topic model and the cartography behind it is the implementation of Latent Dirichlet Allocation found in MALLET. This particular technology proceeds through a probabilistic process that eventually determines a coherent cluster of words that regularly occur with each other. These clusters are our topics. Because the process is, purposefully, somewhat random in its beginning moving toward a finer and finer determination as the algorithm iterates over the body of texts, it will by nature generate slightly different topics with each pass over the same material.

That noted, we feel confident, based on the outcomes described in the previous section, that we arrived at a reasonable sketch of folklore studies in its first century or so, a sketch with great potential to become a more robust map.

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This initial work is limited to an examination of historical trends. There is more work to be done. Having isolated not one but eight potential topics intertwined within the turn towards performance, we now face the challenge of trying to understand how these ideas are related.

With these topics in hand, we can also chart the network of citations that are, perhaps, to be found within and across these texts. Such an approach would allow readers to see not only the network of ideas, the ideology or ideologies of folklore studies, but also the networks of authors. The whole, the culture and society that lie behind the discipline and the field, may very well give us the opportunity to understand folklore studies a system. As a small society, it will be but one system among many, but that limitation is also an opportunity. (We have, for example, access to abstracts for the past ten years of the annual meeting. Etc.)

In an expanded version of this work, we anticipate not only a more detailed examination of the historical trends but also a better assessment of the way authors, ideas, texts, and domains of inquiry intersect and interact. A very common way to examine the relationships between texts, especially in those fields where co-authorship is a common practice is to begin with a bimodal graph of authors and texts:

slide

Using such a graph as a starting point, it is possible to project two networks: the network of authors as a function of the texts which they co-author and a network of texts as a function of the authors which they have in common. The same kind of bimodal network applies to citations, and similar kinds of projections are commonly created.

Tripartite Graph

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Even from these few examples here, it is easy to see that there are a number of possibilities for spanning from one bipartite graph to another such that one could explore the relationship between authors and particular topics. (See Figure) One could just as easily imagine doing something similar for the respective journals involved, or for comparing citation net- works over and against topical networks. What all of these relationships, and their projections into networks, makes possible is an examination of the possible convergences and divergences, or slippage, between one set of relationships and another. Our belief is that the convergences are likely to confirm conventional understandings of folklore studies as a domain and as a field and that the slippages will perhaps raise interesting questions that will require a closer look at the intellectual history of the discipline and its societies. Do, for example, slippages lead simply to the leaking of disciplinary focus or intensity or do they lead to innovation at the fringes of the domain that will make their way back to the center, and how quickly does that movement, as a move from the center to the margin or from the margin to the center, occur?

Obviously, this new way of mapping the intellectual topographies and histories of a domain raises a great number of possibilities for correlation. Which of those correlations will reveal new ways of understanding the work we do as individual practitioners or in groups is yet to be revealed. As we noted above, following Goldstone and Underwood, topic modeling is just as good at revealing what is being written about as it is at reveal- ing how something was written, which might open an avenue for those interested in stylistics to examine modes of scholarly discourse. While an approach like topic modeling begins by working on a very large scale, it enables new ways to regard things up close. Far from de-personalizing scholarship, topic modeling as a form of distant reading makes possible the kind of close reading that makes it possible for us to see texts and their authors much more personally. The role of the individual in tradition has always been a great concern for folklore studies. At long last there seems to be methods of intellectual historiography that make it possible to see ourselves in the mirror the same way we see the world through the windows of our practice.

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How We Worked