Judeo-Spanish on the Web: Description of a Social Bookmarking Experiment

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to give a description of a project involving selection of digital content written in Judeo-Spanish on the Web. By relying on the work done with graduate students, we try to identify pathways of research that would be fruitful for our ongoing work on building a Judeo-Spanish digital collection, which, in turn, can be an important step in saving this endangered language from extinction. The project is carried out through a social bookmarking paradigm, which is a relatively novel way of both individual and collaborative work. Our preliminary observations show that social bookmarking can help us organize our selection of digital content relevant to Judeo-Spanish, as long as the participants are trained to use the social bookmarking tools and if they are sufficiently knowledgeable about the topics of research.

KEYWORDS: Social bookmarking, digital collection, Judeo-Spanish, collaborative work

1 Problem description

Judeo-Spanish is a language spoken by Jews who originate from the Iberian Peninsula, who,after the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, mostly spread around the Mediterranean. The language (also referred to as *Ladino* or *Judezmo*) is classified[1] on the UNESCO red list as "severely endangered"(Mosely, 2010). This means that "the language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may still understand the language, they typically do not speak it to their children" (UNESCO, Language Vitality and Endangerment, 2003). One of nine criteria (according to the group of linguistics experts at UNESCO) that allows for the ascertainment of the level of vitality of a language is the urgency of the need for its documentation.[2]

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1 On the scale of vitality of a language marked from 0 to 5, where [5] is safe, [5-] is stable yet threatened, [4] unsafe, [3] definitively endangered, [2] severely endangered, [1] critically endangered, and [0] extinct

In the case of Judeo-Spanish, there is a multitude of written content, but their type and their quality do not place this language high enough on the testing scale of language vitality because of the absence of an established grammar reference book and daily press in this language.[3] The recognized presence of content in and about Judeo-Spanish on the Web has a double importance: 1) it can increase the visibility of this language and that of the population connected to it, thus assisting in the re-evaluation of its status, and 2) Judeo-Spanish content can serve as de facto content in the development of Judeo-Spanish corpus with the goal of linguistic description, but also as sources of authentic documents (textual, auditory, audiovisual) potentially useful for pedagogical use.

It is clear that the selection of informational content available and accessible on the web requires a methodology on both the individual and collective level. To this end, social bookmarking, which we will describe in broad strokes, seems to hold some promise, especially taking into consideration how it is used and how it moves from an individual to a group logic.

This article studies the question of the selection of digital content on the Web with the help of social-bookmarking. By relying on the experimentation and the work done with graduate students (masters and doctoral candidates), we try to identify pathways of research that would be fruitful for our ongoing work on building a Judeo-Spanish digital collection.[4]

2 Methodology

We have opted for a protocol of observation of the ethnomethodological type (Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology, 1967) in order to identify the way in which participants resolve the given problem.

The population comprised student volunteers enrolled in the Masters of Hispanic and Hispano-American Studies of the University of Bordeaux Montaigne. The procedure consisted of getting the participants to work in a collaborative manner within a digital context and share their research results remotely. This information research was conducted as part of a scientific project entitled "The Digital Technology in the Service of Sephardic Heritage." ("Le numérique au service du patrimoine séfarade").

This project, supported by the scientific policy of the University of Bordeaux Montaigne, was initiated during the winter semester of 2013. Students in the Master program were invited to participate in the research project by collecting relevant websites.

Our first goal was to direct the participants of the experiment to organize their Web browsing content selection (online documents, pages or websites). A collaborative approach in a digital context was initiated after having been presented as a solution constraint for the given work. One of the goals was to contribute to the development of digital competence among the participants: according to the American Library Association, "to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association, 1989). Further, what we also wanted to observe/measure, beyond this development of informational competence, concerned the question of vocabulary used to describe selected websites and web pages using key words.

The organization of work done by the participants of the experiment was based on regularly attended workshops for the purpose of exchanging the use of tools for information search and initiation into social bookmarking. All students selected for the

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2 The others are: six factors that measure the degree of vitality or linguistic erosion (intergenerational language transmission, absolute number of speakers, proportion of speakers to the population in general, shifts in domains of language use, responses to new domains and media, availability of materials for language education and literacy). Two factors that inform the approach regarding a language (governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use, and community members' attitudes towards their own language). UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, p. 9-17.

3 There are many dictionaries of Judeo-Spanish, as well as language textbooks. See Marie-Christine Varol, *Manuel de judéo-espagnol, langue et culture*, Paris, Langues INALCO, L'Asiathèque, 1998. Multiple periodicals, partially or entirely in Judeo-Spanish are currently published, but none is quotidian. See *Aki Yerushalayim* (Israel), Şalom and its supplement *El amaneser* (Turkey), etc.

4 Research project "Judeo-Spanish Digital Corpus" ("Corpus numérique judéo-espagnol"), University Bordeaux Montaigne – EA 3656 AMERIBER. Rouissi and Stulic-Etchevers 2012; Rouissi and Stulic-Etchevers 2013.
Official website of the platform Delicious, accessible at https://delicious.com/, last accessed 22 November, 2014.

project had advanced knowledge of Spanish and had gone through a brief introductory course of Judeo-Spanish language and culture.

Our hypothesis was that social bookmarking could constitute an initial response to our problem of organizing and selecting informational content relevant to Judeo-Spanish.

3 Social bookmarking

What we mean by "social bookmarking" is the organization of a group of favorite links, shared, managed and compiled within a web application. The collection of favorite links can be managed either individually or collectively. Significantly, any list of links created by one person can be made accessible to others. This can be done in an entirely open fashion, i.e. by suggesting lists to all net users, or by limiting access to a community of users interested in a particular subject, identified as such. The user of an application such as social bookmarking can decide to withhold all his chosen selections of informational content for himself or herself, or else suggest it to others.

There are several issues in the use of social bookmarking. As an ensemble of potential strategies of organizing selections of websites, social bookmarking acts as an aid to memory, saving and easily retrieving information (documents, pages, relevant sites) in the form of links selected by a person for their own use, or else by and for others based on a simple principle: the collective result transcends the sum of individual contributions. Further, it thus offers the possibility of exploring the web through the eyes of a community that shares the same interests or inquiries, which can save some time and is far more efficient than any possible individual and isolated activity.

There are multiple advantages to using social bookmarking. Not all websites are necessarily indexed by search engines, and, in the case of social bookmarking, the gathered links are the result of evaluation by a person, and not of the application of an algorithm. The social aspect of the web application allows round the clock and remote access, a feature that enables one to overcome constraints of use on a specific device. The saving is done online, which ensures a degree of security greater than any individual device can guarantee.

Further, we can say that browsing lists of links can also be conducive to serendipitous discoveries. Another aspect that can be included among advantages is the ability to stream, such as RSS, which allows subscription by third parties and easier distribution of work led by individuals or by a community.

On the other hand, several points require particular attention. This is certainly the case for key words, as they do not always emerge from stable or standardized vocabularies. One downside is the phenomenon known as "folksonomy" or "social indexation" (folk+taxonomy) designating the practice of indexation of bookmarks by users according to their own key words (tags, labels). When too many links are shared (which is often the case), there can be a loss in the efficiency of the system, reduced relevance of key words, or even errors in data entry.

4 Results

The first phase of the work was to select an application that runs on a social website that allows online bookmark management and sharing. For this, we initially selected two applications that seemed to be the best fit for our needs: Delicious[5] and Diigo[6]. A brief analysis made clear that the platform Delicious was better suited for an individual use and subsequent sharing of bookmarks, while Diigo seemed to be better suited for collaborative use. In the latter case, the possibility of posting comments, making notes and giving opinions (such as "like") was an important function in the context of joint work. Combined with a number of visualizations for each link, these comments represent a true indication of popularity and information regarding both the pertinence and thus the reliability of the linked content. Such information (comments and number of views) can help validate the relevance of the listed link.

One group was created specifically for the platform Diigo[7]. This group's work consisted of six persons,

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Figure 1. List of links suggested by members of the group

of whom two teacher researchers, also in the role of observers. Here is the page of the project:

In the eight weeks in which the project took place in the winter of 2013 (between February and March of that year), the participants made a selection of 107 sites, categorized by 71 tags. A dictionary of tags, comprising 9 values (cultural portal, museum, university or research center, review – magazine, courses – lectures, encyclopedia, Web guide (list of links), digital library catalogue, student organization), based on preliminary observation work (Rouissi, Stulic, 2012), offered recommendations and had been given to 4 students participating in the project. We noticed, unsurprisingly, that recommended tags were used the most, with the instructions

Figure 2. Adding a URL and the list of recommended tags

having been followed in this case. However, we would like to point out that for these 9 tags, the participants added 62 values. In Figure 2, we can see how a link can be added and freely described using the tag dictionary ("Recom'ded"): [8]

collaboration. They also recognized the need to gain an informational competence and knowledge of diverse tools that could facilitate their information search. From this point of view, the question of standardized vocabulary appeared as

Figure 3. List of contributions of one member of the working group

As we can see in Figure 3, it is possible to view the contributions of any member, as well as their comments:

5 Discussion and perspectives

The project participants reported difficulties in their collaborative work because the number of tags used swelled rapidly due to a lack of prior coordination. It was necessary to quickly resort to a "common vocabulary" in order to allow for a more precise description of each link and category by referring to tags, in order to more easily browse the collected links.

Our intention was to encourage the students to examine possible ways of working together and sharing the results of their Web searches in a digital way. The four participants reported that this experimentation changed their view of both information research and potential peer

obvious at the end of the first phase of compiling a list of websites, due to the rapid increase of the number of tags. The regular meetings allowed them to supervise their work, and all the participants became aware of the difficulty of managing this type of work without ever meeting in the physical world, that is, doing so exclusively digitally. The adequacy of suggested descriptors at the beginning of the project was examined during these meetings, and they revealed a necessity to introduce other descriptors, absent from the initial list, yet relevant for the description of content in Judeo-Spanish.

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the Web's impact has increased exponentially due to the ever more rapid development of digital technology, which has led to ever greater dissemination of informational content. Most commonly, Web applications create and publish their content in the form of websites. The resulting situation has

8 As we can see in Figure 2, "Recom'ded" is the list of tags predefined by the working group, thus creating a useful vocabulary for the contributors.

been described as *infobesity* or *information overload* (Schick, Gordon and Haka, 1990; Eppler and Mengis, 2004). This transition to the "completely digital," in which individual and autonomous, or user generated, content has contributed to a data explosion, has raised issues of various protocols and processes of indexation of websites on different levels (the economic, political, pedagogical, etc.). After more than two decades of exponential growth, the difficulties in identifying and selecting relevant sources has only increased.

With the growth of the Web, the question of information search has become ever more crucial. The question has been revisited endlessly due to the exponential growth of digital content, documents and information available. For its part, the web stockpiles an immense volume of information, the variety, fragmentation, relevance and stability of which are difficult to fully comprehend. We are witness to a real paradox: from a technological standpoint, access to information has never been easier – all it takes is a hypertext link, an Internet connection, and a computer, which of late include mobile phones and tablets. However, from a cognitive standpoint, access to relevant information is becoming ever more arduous, because it requires enlisting the help of a technology which always changes shape.

All this requires the development of strategies of information research.

There is no doubt that the ease of access to pertinent information through the Web has been immensely useful in a myriad of social contexts. In this article, we explore how a strategy of collective work in information selection requires some human involvement. This method is applicable to a specific problem of researching information about an endangered language, with the aim of developing a revitalization program. Taking into consideration the importance of the digital in modern life, for a language running the risk of disappearing, the evaluation of its presence on the web is an important step in both diagnosing its current use and in documenting its actual usage, the two being preconditions for putting in place a strategy for the valorization and revitalization of the language. The problem we raise here is the one of selecting information published on websites, the number of which is practically impossible to determine with any degree of exactitude.

Can social bookmarking help us organize our selection of digital content relevant for Judeo-Spanish? Our preliminary observations lead us to answer yes to this question; we do, however, recognize the necessity to train young researchers to use this kind of tools, which implies knowledge of certain notions tied to documentation and computer science, which was not obvious to participants at the beginning of the project. Likewise, knowledge of the domain of applications, and, in our case, of Judeo-Spanish culture, seems indispensable for a sound evaluation of available information. A deepened reflection led collectively through the framework of this project revealed two domains of Judeo-Spanish culture with a significant presence on the web: cuisine and teaching activities.

Based on these conclusions, we envisage working to develop instruction programs for the purpose of raising awareness among young researchers and training them to develop ways of working collaboratively by combining the digital domain and human intelligence.

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