

SADiLaR-UJ externship highlights career possibilities in digital humanities

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10 Jul 2023

A group of linguistics and language practice students from the University of Johannesburg (UJ) recently attended an online workshop with staff from the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) to learn more about the career possibilities in the field of digital humanities. This one-day externship, which took place on 14 June 2023 via Zoom, offered the students a different perspective on the types of careers they could follow, once qualified.



Programme coordinator Dr Benito Trollip (right) with Norrkhuleko Ngubane during the online externship event with UJ students

"Our main goal was to provide students with a short-term professional learning experience in digital humanities and language development," says Dr Benito Trollip, digital humanities researcher for Afrikaans at SADiLaR and the main organiser of the externship. "We did this by introducing the students to SADiLaR and its different research nodes; demonstrating some of the tools we use to analyse, annotate, translate or otherwise interact with language in the digital space; and having staff members give personal accounts of their work at SADiLaR."

The idea for an externship originated when Laurinda van Tonder, lecturer in Applied Linguistics at UJ's Department of Languages, Cultural Studies and Applied Linguistics, contacted Trollip to find out whether an externship for the final-year Linguistics and Language Practice students would be possible at SADiLaR.

"Laurinda explained to me that the students normally have one-day internships at institutions such as banks and local government offices (where language practitioners are also working), but she thought that introducing the students to SADiLaR would enhance their view on the available careers within language," Trollip recalls. "She also had to explain to me what an externship is – which is basically an online internship," he adds.

Informative and thought-provoking

According to Trollip, SADiLaR's very first externship was a huge success. "We received very positive feedback from the participants as well as the SADiLaR team members that took part. The students engaged a lot and I feel the interactions between them and the team from SADiLaR were natural, informative and thought-provoking.

"We spent a lot of time going through the website and showing the students how to find the information, resources and tools they could possibly need. Our tutorials on the various tools illustrated to students what is available and how it could assist them with their work and studies in the different linguistic and applied linguistic areas they are busy with or planning to

pursue,” he says. “Two tools that especially peaked the interest and interaction of the students were the Autshumato machine translation (translating a sentence from English to isiZulu), and searching for words in the Corpus portal.”

According to Rooweither Mabuya, digital humanities researcher for isiZulu at SADiLaR, who joined the externship's afternoon session, the students were very keen to learn more about the research happening at SADiLaR. “I shared my research interests with the students and explained how I was introduced to digital humanities and digital scholarship when I joined SADiLaR. I also highlighted how attending various workshops and training opportunities helped me to understand how I could use Digital Humanities in my research.” Rooweither, who is a PhD candidate, was pleased when a student asked her to share the tools she is using for her research.

Another SADiLaR digital humanities researcher, Mmasibidi Setaka (who specialises in Sesotho), was impressed with how engaging the students were. “They asked many questions related to what we do at SADiLaR. Since Digital Humanities is still a young field in South Africa, they found it interesting to learn more about the work we are doing in digitising and creating language resources for the 11 official languages. I also shared how we host different workshops to share the knowledge we have acquired with others. Based on the success of this externship, I would like us to extend it to other institutions too.”

The below student feedback speaks for itself and more externships are sure to follow in the future:

“Thank you so much guys. This was very informative. Continue to host more of these please. Other people would really appreciate it too.”

“Thank you to everyone. This was productive, exciting, and very much needed to us as students.”

“I just want to say thank you to the whole SADiLaR team for this experience today. We all learned a lot, and we are motivated to further in this field and maybe one day join you all. Everyone had a great spirit.”

About SADiLaR

Hosted by the North-West University, the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) is a national centre supported by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) as part of the new South African Research Infrastructure Roadmap (SARIR).

SADiLaR has an enabling function, with a focus on all official languages of South Africa, supporting research and development in the domains of language technologies and language-related studies in the humanities and social sciences. The Centre supports the creation, management and distribution of digital language resources, as well as applicable software, which are freely available for research purposes through the Language Resource Catalogue.

SADiLaR clients include academic scholars and professionals in all domains of Humanities and Social Sciences, Language Technologies, Natural Language Processing, Computer Science, as well as potential end-users in education, business and industry.

Caption: Programme Coordinator Dr Benito Trollip with Miss Nomkhuleko Ngubane during the online externship event with UJ students

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