Led by Anthony W. Johnson, the ‘Time Machine’ project originated through an interdisciplinary collaboration between literary scholars, linguists and information engineers. Their basic premise was that different communities are often able to detect anachronisms and linguistic forgeries or intuit the accuracy of a particular world represented in a text because traces of the actual historical time in which it has been written remain as a residue. With this in mind, the team created the ‘Time Machine’: a digital prosthetic against which human intuitions concerning the temporality of a text, or the time periods represented within it, could be checked. Simply put, the ‘Time Machine’ software digitally maps what the Polish critic Jan Bialostocki would have called the ‘iconospheres’ (or ‘envelopes of time’) represented in a text against the date-stamped historical records for a particular language (e.g. the ‘Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary’), colour-coding the words within a particular iconosphere according to their status as neologisms, long-standing presences within the language of the moment represented in the text, or anachronisms. In this way, the ‘Time Machine’ is able to register a range of effects, including the temporal consistency of a fictional world, linguistic forgery, or collocative change; and to chart the developing imaginative or conceptual contours of a word as it changes meaning over time. On the assumption that ‘novels capture worlds’, the team initially worked with examples taken from Scottish Historical novels. But as all text types and genres (whether they be narrative, descriptive, expository, argumentative) to some extent gesture towards a possible world (fictional or factual, past, present, or future), the team has subsequently developed the software in conjunction for a wider range of applications – from small corpora of previously unpublished manuscript materials to ‘Big Data’ repositories – opening up, in particular, the possibility of its use on extremely large lexical sets.

Some relevant publications on ‘Iconospheres’ and the ‘Time Machine’


