

Sophister Module Description Template 2026-27

Full Name: Meaning in the Machine: An Accessible Introduction to Computational Literary Studies

Short Name: Computational Literary Studies

Lecturer Name(s) and Email Address(es): Rían Boyle, boyleri@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10 ECTS

Semester Taught MT/HT: HT

Year JF/SF/JS/SS: JS

Module Content:

More books will be published in 2026 alone than survive from the entire medieval period. Every second, more words will be posted to the internet than were ever written in Old English. The modes, and amount, of cultural production have come a long way since the beginnings of English literature, but how can we possibly deal with the immensity of that scale? Is it possible to “read” a culture like a text, and if so, how?

This module will explore the variety of theoretical approaches researchers have employed to navigate the vast ocean of modern cultural data. While these methodologies are diverse, they coalesce around a single point - the corpus - bodies of related texts that contain millions of possible data points. We will engage with corpora from a fundamentally lexical-semantic standpoint; how sets of words used to create, reflect, and reinforce different discourses, and objects of meaning, across a range of literary fields.

Throughout the course, texts and corpora from different historical periods and cultural contexts will be analysed and compared, including newspapers, social media, fanfiction, and more traditional literary corpora. Corpora of medieval literature will be employed as a counterbalance; to demonstrate how meaning and discourse can drastically shift from one context to another. Furthermore, we will make heavy use of computational tools like corpus software, Regular Expressions, and basic statistical tests to interrogate corpora as deeply as possible.

(Familiarity with medieval texts or computational tools is not required, and translations of texts will be provided.)

Learning Outcomes:

Upon completion of this module, students should be able to:

- Construct their own corpora from the ground up
- Critically study disparate corpora through both qualitative and quantitative perspectives
- Employ rigorous computational analysis of literary data without the use of LLMs
- Trace changes in meaning and cultural production across the history of English literature

- Discuss how language is used to construct and reinforce different discourses in a range of contexts

Learning Aims:

- Introduce students to key scholarship on recent theories in literature and language, including Distant Reading and Cultural Analytics
- Demonstrate how areas of language (lexical-semantic fields) are used to construct ideas, objects, and Discourses
- Encourage students to apply their knowledge of different lexical-semantic fields across the history of English, and explore how meaning, and meaning-making, can change substantially
- Equip students with the tools and techniques to analyse and evaluate lexical-semantic fields from a corpus perspective; including using corpus software, Regular Expressions, and basic computational analysis
- Highlight the breadth and variability of corpora, their use cases, and how to identify bias in their construction

Assessment Details:

- Number of Components: 2
- 20%: One short essay identifying a lexical-semantic field and associated word list (1000 words)
- 80%: Final essay exploring that lexical-semantic field in a corpus context (4000 words)

Provisional Module Outline:

Week One: An Introduction to Literary Corpus Linguistics

Selected chapter(s) from *Corpus Linguistics: Readings in a Widening Discipline* (Samson & McCarthy), the introduction to *Corpus Linguistics: An International Handbook* (Lüdeling & Kytö), *Data Feminism* (D'Ignazio & Klein) in particular Chapter 6

Week Two: Distant Reading

"The Slaughterhouse of Literature" (Moretti), *Macroanalysis* (Jockers) in particular the Introduction, *Distant Horizons* (Underwood)

Week Three: Lexical Semantics and Semantic Change

Historical Linguistics (Campbell) in particular chapters 5 & 6, Case Studies in 'Wyrd → Weird' in *Beowulf*, *Macbeth*, and modern discourse

Week Four: Cultural Analytics, "Culturomics", and Literary Data

Cultural Analytics (Manovich), "Quantitative Analysis of Culture using Millions of Digitized Books" (Michel et al.). AntConc Corpus Software and Regular Expressions.

Week Five: Discourse Analysis and the Language of Power

"The Order of Discourse" (Foucault), *Discourse Analysis* (Widdowson), Case Studies in Power, Wealth, and Money terms.

Week Six: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and LIFE, DEATH, TIME metaphors

"Conceptual Metaphor Theory" (Kövecses), "Life, Death, and Time," in *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Lakoff & Turner); "Because I could not stop for Death—" (Dickinson); "Sonnet 7" (Milton).

Week Seven: “You shall know a word by the company it keeps”; Semantic Prosody in the Language of Family

“A Synopsis of Literary Theory 1930-1955” (Firth), “Corpora and Collocations” (Evert), Case Studies in Father, Mother, Daughter, Son terms.

Week Eight: The Language of Norms in the Public Sphere.

Sermo Lupi ad Anglos (Wulfstan of York), Newspaper Corpora, Ælfrician Homiletic Corpus

Week Nine: The Languages of Gender in Medieval Texts and Modern Medieval Fanfiction

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (The Gawain Poet), Fan Works of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* collected from Archive Of Our Own

Week Ten: Social Media and Sentiment Analysis from a Literary Perspective

A Practical Guide to Sentiment Analysis (Cambria et al.), Social Media Corpora

Week Eleven: Presentations on Areas of Language, and Workshop (Student Led)

Students will give short presentations on a semantic field of interest, followed by a workshop on tackling computational problems to literary analysis

Preliminary Reading List:

Burrows, J.F. *Computation into Criticism: A Study of Jane Austen’s Novels and an Experiment in Method*. Clarendon Press. 1987.

Campbell, Lyle. *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press. 2020.

D’Ignazio, Catherine and Lauren F. Klein. *Data Feminism*. The MIT Press. 2020.

Firth, J. R. “A Synopsis of Linguistic Theory 1930-1955.” In *Studies in Linguistic Analysis*, edited by J.R. Firth, 1-32. Blackwell. 1962.

Foucault, Michel. “The Order of Discourse”. In *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by Robert Young, 48-78. Routledge. 1981.

Kövecses, Zoltán. “Conceptual Metaphor Theory.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*, edited by Elena Semino and Zsófia Demjén, 11–27. Routledge. 2017

Lüdeling, Anke, and Merja Kytö. eds. *Corpus Linguistics: An International Handbook*. Vol. 1. Mouton de Gruyter. 2008.

Manovich, Lev. *Cultural Analytics*. The MIT Press. 2020.

Michel, Jean-Baptiste, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva P. Aiden, et al. “Quantitative Analysis of Culture using Millions of Digitized Books.” *Science* 331, no. 6014 (2011): 176 –182

Moretti, Franco. “The Slaughterhouse of Literature.” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 207-227

Sampson, Geoffrey, and Diana McCarthy, eds. *Corpus Linguistics: Readings in a Widening Discipline*. Continuum. 2004

Underwood, Ted. *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change*. University of Chicago Press. 2019.

Widdowson, H. G. *Discourse Analysis*. Oxford University Press, 2007

Please note:

- Curricular information is subject to change.

- Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.