



Lunchtime Lecture

28.06.2023, 12:00 (s. t.)

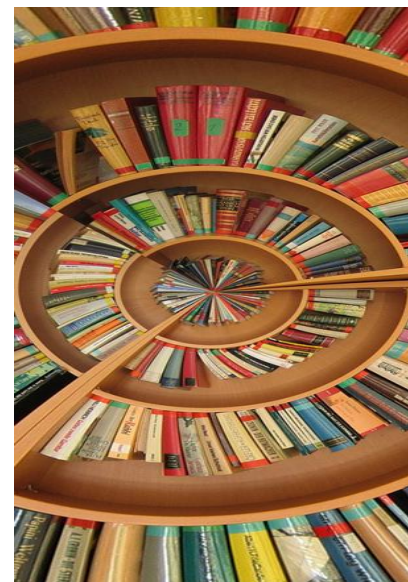
UniMeet-Link: <https://unimeet.uni-graz.at/b/bau-r0l-mcw-72u>

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Literary Quality: What Makes a Book Worth Reading

The concept of literary quality has been frequently addressed throughout history - individual authors, schools of poetics and rhetoric, and creative writing handbooks have often tried to gauge what makes a high-quality text. Yet, there are relatively few quantitative methods for measuring literary quality, due to two main challenges: how to model a literary text quantitatively, and how to uniformly measure reception in the face of varying individual opinions. Despite these complexities, there's a nearly universal belief that "something like quality" does exist in literature, evident in the establishment of literary awards, anthological selections, and literary canons, which result from generations of readers' individual preferences converging on a small number of texts. Using these opposing perspectives, I will discuss the different ways in which we have tried to observe whether correlations between literary quality and textual patterns can be found using different proxies of literary reception



and different forms of textual modeling. I will start from our early studies on narrative texts' sentiment arc coherence (measured through algorithms of fractal analysis) and their applications to literary fairy tales, and I will then move to our larger ML experiments on thousands of literary novels. I will also discuss the different perspectives on quality perception that we have accumulated through our studies, from GoodReads' average ratings to canonical anthologies, pointing to their strengths and weaknesses as quality proxies. Our research in literary quality does not aim to find a conclusive answer to "what quality is", but to study the question in relatively new ways and to further its overall understanding. I will conclude by discussing the possible frameworks that would help us better define literary quality if - it is possible to do it at all - and some perspectives on what our results might be showing us.



Yuri Bizzoni is a postdoc at the University of Århus, working in the research group FabulaNet. He has been studying and teaching Computational Linguistics throughout his career, mainly looking for applications to literary questions and texts. Before studying literary quality he has focused on topics such as diachronic literary translations of Homeric texts, metaphor detection and aptness, and the evolution of domain-specific styles.