

# CoreDH

## Episode 3—Menno van Zaanen, DHASA

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Guest: Menno van Zaanen, representative of [DHASA](#), [menno.vanzaanen@nwu.ac.za](mailto:menno.vanzaanen@nwu.ac.za)

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*Hannah:* Welcome to CoreDH. A podcast that explores the stories and people behind the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations.

*Erdal:* Hello everybody, this is Erdal Ayan.

*Anna Sofia:* Hi, this is Anna Sofia Lippolis from the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, ADHO in short, and welcome to the third episode in our podcast series about the stories of ADHO's core—its constituent organizations.

*Erdal:* Today, we are hosting Menno van Zaanen, a professor in Digital Humanities at the [South African Centre for Digital Language Resources](#) and a representative member of The Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa. Can you briefly introduce yourself for us and our listeners?

*Menno:* Thank you very much for inviting me, I'm really looking forward to this chat. And just a quick background—so, my original studies were in Computer Science, low level computer science, building operating systems and stuff like that. I was really interested in parsing, so the structuring of computer programs, which is quite similar to that of language, I mean there are differences, but the ideas are the same. So from that I kind of moved into trying to structural language and then I tried to build systems that tried to automatically learn this from, for example, text, and I realized I could also do this for music, for example, or other sequences. So from that kind of starting point I moved to different modalities and always tried to take some techniques from one field and just apply into the other and then take something back from the other, so trying to move and switch between fields all the time. And that's essentially, at first I fully didn't realize this, but I think that at least for me is one of the most fun things about Digital Humanities, taking a background, for example a background in more computational techniques, and then applying them to other fields more humanities.

*Anna Sofia:* There's a lot to say because you've done a lot of research, but basically starting to switch between fields is how you got involved in Digital Humanities.

*Menno:* Exactly, yeah. And I still like doing that, so that's what I enjoy best and we can really talk for hours about this I guess, but what I didn't mention is what I really like is the collaboration that you can get, right? If I move, or if I try to apply my techniques into a new field, I'm really not the expert in that field so I need to find somebody who knows more about

that specific field but is also open to not only trying out new techniques or trying out this computational approach, so that's what I really like about Digital Humanities, the switching and the collaboration.

*Anna Sofia:* I actually agree, I love it too and I didn't think it was possible to meet such a collaborative community. It's very active on social media as well, so it's great.

*Erdal:* Perhaps we can talk about the organization that Menno is working for: the Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa (DHASA)...

*Menno:* Oh yeah, I can definitely say something about that! So I worked in Europe for quite a while, but two and a half years ago I moved to South Africa, especially because I think South Africa has a very interesting kind of background and context to work here. So I was actually involved in some of the kind of the relatively old works in computational linguistics in South Africa, that was the beginning of 2002-2003, I gave a few courses here and I did a few projects, mostly in computational linguistics, and these people have been quite active in South Africa building really practical tools such as spellcheckers and machine translation systems. So I know these people, not that well, but I've been several times in South Africa and worked with them, and they were really nice colleagues to work with.

Computational Linguistics is I think the field in Digital Humanities in the broader sense that has been most active in South Africa. I'm not saying that there was nothing else, but that this is the group that has been most active. So you see that at some point, this was in 2015, there was a DH workshop that was organized actually at the Northwestern University where I'm now located and you could see that a lot of that came from computational linguistics but there were also other people coming in. And I realized DH is not the same as computational linguistics, I was really trying to make it a bit bigger and in 2016 they organized, I was really not involved at the time yet, but they organized the second national DH workshop again here at the Northwestern University and that was also the year when they founded DHASA, so the Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa.

At the same time, they were actually trying to push the Digital Humanities field here and they also managed to get funding for SADiLaR where I work now, the South African Center for Digital Language Resources and the Digital Humanities language resources essentially gives it away: originally comes from this computational linguistics idea. We host a repository of digital language resources so the focus was still much on computational linguistics, and then I came in, so about two and a half years ago that's my task here within SADiLaR: to boost the field of Digital Humanities in South Africa. And I really tried to move it and not away from computational linguistics, because that's my background as well, but to kind of expand it to other fields and I wouldn't say we're there, because you know, you're never there, but it is growing.

So we've organized a Digital Humanities monthly colloquium here and I tried to get a nice mix of people from South Africa to show, you know, people in South Africa are doing things already and they don't realize they're doing Digital Humanities, but also international people, to show, that this is what more that can be done, right? We might actually be able to do it here in South Africa. That's essentially SADiLaR, the place where I work. I am also involved in DHASA, the Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa, so that's a little bit

wider—it's not just South Africa, we actually tried to boost the field in the countries around here, so not just South Africa, but there's still a lot to be done, there are a lot of people, especially from the field of Humanities, who are actually interested in Digital Humanities, but they don't really know where to start, right? If you have a humanities background, then this "digital" sounds to a lot of people extremely scary, because a lot of people doing Humanities are doing things because they feel that they're not technical at all, that's why they go into these kind of "softer sciences" if you want to call them that, so I think a lot of people are interested, but they don't know where to start. I'm trying to help them a little bit there.

*Erdal:* Do you also organize some training for the potential, let's say, followers, or people with a specific interest in DH or programming?

*Menno:* Oh, definitely. So I think—how much time do we have? I think we need more time to list all that! We are organizing several things, and I'm talking with two hats on at the same time I guess, so SADiLaR is organizing a lot of different training events, we have at the moment 11 researchers working at SADiLaR that have a background in one of the 11 of the official languages and again these people come from these language backgrounds, they know about languages or literature, but they don't have a strong digital or computational background. So I give courses, not official courses but I try to teach them some of the background that I know for them to move into the field. But that's really on a small scale within the organization.

But we realized we need to get this out to more people in the country. So even before I came here, these researchers actually give trainings and one of the things they had to do to prepare them is to just learn some tools. You don't necessarily need to know all the computational things, you don't necessarily need to know all the programming, but really pick a tool that you might find useful and you could just analyze some text, visualize a text, get a sense of what's in a larger text, and just doing that already gives you an idea of what you can do. So you kind of "force"—sounds bad, "force"—the researchers to learn a few of these tools and then actually try and teach others to show what you can do with these tools. That's again within SADiLaR.

We've also organized, and this is an ongoing larger project, the [Escalator project](#). The original idea was to have a mentorship program where people can go in and get mentorship to dive into Digital Humanities. At first, the idea was just to have one mentorship program. We realized though that there are so many aspects that you need to know of or, depending on your background, that you might find more interesting, we actually have several mentorship programs now, and we're still thinking of organizing more. So one that we have is really a starter— if you have no clue of what Digital Humanities is, where do you start? So we just have several Youtube videos that show, you know, example projects. So it's nothing hands-on, it's really, you know, what does this mean? And then we have one program that's specifically aimed for women, because we have the feeling that they are, not really left behind, but somehow they need a bit of extra guidance or pushing or whatever you want to call it. And that's actually been very successful. So it's specifically aimed at women and I heard that men are also welcome. So these are presentations typically given by women to show it's not just men who're doing all of this.

Also, we are thinking of organizing some regional events again, because hopefully the pandemic is a little bit over now at least it looks like this in the moment in South Africa, and there we also want to focus on people in management: what if we can explain to deans in faculty, for example, what Digital Humanities is? So they will actually support researchers who are saying they want to move into the field. So if deans or higher up don't know what it is, then why would they support the researchers who are going into the field? That's essentially what SADiLaR's doing in collaboration with DHASA.

Last year we also had a DHASA conference where we really tried to make this a somewhat bigger event so it was fully online because everything was online last year, but we really tried to have several tutorials there as well and these were from extremely basic – for some people they might be already challenging – , ex. information on how do you get on Wikipedia, how to add information to Wikipedia, just to get a sense of how all of this works? How can you actually get information online? – to quite technical discussions with some text mining, with programming, etc. So we tried to get a range of tutorials for people to get a sense of what it is, what can I learn, and just to have it in a short amount of time. It's not like a 14-week course that you need to block your time for it. We're doing quite a few things to hopefully help to train people in the field. But again, there's much more that needs to be done but at some point there's only so many people who do it at the moment!

*Anna Sofia:* It's awesome that you're doing so much and you're also thinking about accessibility. I know that it's so difficult to explain to basically everyone who's not in the field what DH actually is and I know, I have a bachelor in Philosophy and when I started approaching the field it was very hard and confusing to me at first, coming from a Humanities background. I know that now there are a lot of tutorials and resources and toolkits online, but they're not to be taken for granted. A lot of the activities you're also thinking of doing, I love the idea of a mentorship but also the concept of learning by example: I think it's great, it's maybe more dynamic than a monologue lesson. We could talk about it forever, but I was also wondering who are the kinds of people who are engaged in your organization and how are they engaging in developing DH?

*Menno:* I know what you mean. So, to be honest I think in a way we're still trying to find out, so we know who's in the organization but who exactly is in the field of Digital Humanities in South Africa? And to be honest I come from a particular background. So you mentioned that you have a bachelor in Philosophy, which is a completely different background than mine, that doesn't mean we both can't be involved in Digital Humanities, we have such a different background, and you probably have different interests because of that, and different places where you publish because of that, etc. So imagine coming into a country, so this is what I did, where you know there are people active in Computational Linguistics, because I know these people, that's already a relatively small community, and Digital Humanities is much bigger, but that kinda fits with my interests and my view of Digital Humanities. And then you realize, ok so this is my safe area, but now I need to kinda step away from that, to see if there is anything else in the country, and also means I don't actually know these people because it's a new country to me, and we also have to keep in mind that we're in a lockdown, so we can't actually travel to these places to meet people so that's been quite interesting. So I still meet people who I think are actually doing DH but they don't realize it yet.

So I've been talking to people who are really interested, for example, in images and collection of images and seeing patterns in these images. I've talked to these people a few times, I had already talked to them a few times, and I didn't realize that they were doing this kind of research, which is clearly my fault, but when I talked to them they had wonderful ideas and I was like, that's actually so cool! And then when I talked to them I'm not sure they fully realized they were already doing DH. You know, they thought they were interested in DH and they wanted to be involved or something like that, but they are already active. And I know that more people are like this, so we had an invited speaker at the last DHASA conference who really comes from the archiving world, made a wonderful presentation, and to be honest I'm not sure if he fully sees himself as being active in the field of Digital Humanities, but I think he is, and so there are more people and I just need to find them because they don't say, you know, I'm active in DH– they're just doing their own stuff.

So I mentioned most people I know best that come from the field of Computational Linguistics but I think we're trying to find more and more people also from libraries, or there's another group also that's active in archiving specifically or humanities data or artifacts... we actually had something I really enjoyed, a presentation from somebody from Theology at the DH conference and again, that's my fault– I never think of people in Theology being interested in Digital Humanities, but they can be! And they can have thoughtful ideas there. So your question was easy in a way, who's involved, who are the people who just run the organization, which is a small group of people, but if you look at the actual community, then I actually still don't know. So that's for us to find out in the next few years I guess!

*Erdal:* Menno, you just highlighted some challenges in creating events or increasing events for some people who are actually doing DH or they have been affected by DH methodologies etc. Do you have some challenges that you have experienced while working with the people in your organization or while conducting your own projects?

*Menno:* Well, I think there are always challenges. But if I tried to think of kinda more generic challenges and not something specifically within a project for example...

*Erdal:* ...for example the funding issue is really challenging for the organizations. Do you have these kinds of things in your area right now or is it difficult to find funding for certain projects there?

*Menno:* Yeah, having more funding is always nice. So, I think in a way we're relatively lucky, and I shouldn't sound too positive because then they will simply start cutting our funding of course, but in a way we're relatively lucky. SADIaR has nice funding, we have research infrastructure, and as such we actually have a nice amount of funding to do a lot of things, so we actually do a lot of things, it's not that we have the money and we do anything with it, and they really want us to boost the whole field and that takes time and effort trying out different ways, so it's nice to not having to worry about funding all the time.

I think the last year and a half- two years it's been more difficult with the pandemic, so the economy is not necessarily doing really well, in South Africa, you know, all the budgets had to be cut, so that makes it a bit more difficult but I think that's all over the world. I also think it might depend very much on the kind of research you want to do. So in South Africa specifically there is quite a focus, and that's also why the field of computational linguistics

has been relatively active, to get all the official languages, the 11 official languages, to essentially get on the same level, which is currently really not the case. So English is one of the official languages, I mean, almost the entire world focuses on English, there are tools there, South African English, not so much, Afrikaans, is a little bit like Dutch, there are quite some resources there, but for the other languages, there are some resources, but the quality is not necessarily the best, and that's not because the tools are not good, but there is not a lot of text that can be used to train on. So most of the tools are trained on government text because these are available, so they work well on government text but if you want to apply to literature then the results are not good. And that's because like I said, not because the tools are not good.

So I think there has been funding to get the status of the languages improved, so you can see that is Digital Humanities and I think it is, but I have the feeling that if you go outside a relatively safe area of the government boosting its languages then it really becomes quite a bit harder. So I think of music for example, or images, and I'm not sure how easy it is to get funding for those projects. What SADiLaR tries to do is we try to fund small projects, but you know it's not the same as the big, national funding agencies handing out money. So I'm not sure how easy it is to get funding and in that sense that's a little of a challenge. But it's changing a little bit. In South Africa, if you publish in the accredited journals, you get some subsidy. Now, because Digital Humanities is not a well-known field in South Africa, there are not so many journals where you could publish on Digital Humanities that are accredited, so either you can not move into DH if you focus on that kind of funding or that kind of accredited journals, or you go into the field but you are kinda struggling getting accredited publications. I have to say it's changing a little bit and again it depends on what your background is you know, what is your research area, within Digital Humanities, because that has also an impact, But that is I actually found and to be honest I still actually haven't figured out on how to get a journal accredited even if it's a high quality journal people don't do the accreditation by simply not know of it. And I don't know exactly how to reach them.

It might also be, again, the pandemic. So I'm currently on campus which is nice but I've worked from home for a year and a half and I can tell you if you just come into the country and after a half year you sit at home, then it is really not the best way of getting to know the people you can just contact. And you won't get to the office and ask them something. So that hasn't really happened yet and for me it's a bit of a challenge. And also I think to get the field growing has been a bit of a challenge because you simply can't go to people or see them at conferences or something like that. So these have already been additional challenges.

*Anna Sofia:* Absolutely. I mean, these are the downsides of being in a field that is not so well-known and also with the conferences it's always the same people: we need to introduce people to DH and DHASA is very helpful in that I think the university work of course can be very helpful in that. At the same time I think the benefits are that you are kind of building something that it's still not there, but you're doing it, and it's great because other fields are maybe more independent right now, they are more well-established, so it's great the work you're doing.

*Menno:* I agree, I quickly want to say it's not just me who is doing it. Now it sounds like it's just I'm doing all of that, no, really, that's not the case! So there are a few people who are really really active in the field and trying to build the field so I'm not going to mention names

because then I'm going to forget somebody and then have to go pick fights on my hands! No, but there are people who are also passionate about trying to get the field off the ground and it's wonderful to do that as a team. You know, I really hope that people see that it's not necessarily they have to think about their own work and just realize: perhaps am I already doing DH? I think if we can get that working then that would be a wonderful, wonderful benefit.

*Anna Sofia:* Yeah, it's great. But we can mention names in the footnotes section! Thank you so much for your participation and availability to do this, it has been extremely insightful: I think listeners will benefit a lot from this talk, thank you so much.

*Erdal:* Thank you for joining us today Menno, and sharing your experience in DH!

*Menno:* Thank you for having me!

*Anna Sofia:* If you enjoyed this episode and you'd like to help support the podcast, please share it with others and post about it on social media. To catch all the latest from ADHO, you can follow us on Facebook and on Twitter @ADHOrg. Thanks for listening, and see you next time!

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## RESOURCES

DHASA: <https://digitalhumanities.org.za/index.php>

SADiLaR: <https://www.sadilar.org/index.php/en/>

Escalator project: <https://escalator.sadilar.org/>

Videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzPUxuFaP0z64pBB5HiYIGA>