

Towards Interoperability in CLARIN

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Abstract

This paper proposes (1) a general scheme for specifying interoperability; (2) tentative specific instantiations for two data types (text and audio) of the general interoperability scheme, as illustration of the general scheme; (3) a policy to be carried out by CLARIN ERIC to ensure continued efforts on interoperability, including specific incentives for individual researchers and CLARIN national consortia.

1 Introduction

This is a position paper in which I make a specific proposal for a policy to work towards interoperability in CLARIN. In section 2 we discuss some general considerations with regard to interoperability. We make a specific (but tentative) technical proposal for interoperability in CLARIN in section 3. We elaborate this proposal in detail for one specific subcase (text) in section 4, and for a second one (audio) in section 5. Section 6 proposes a concrete policy for CLARIN to set up and maintain activities to define interoperability and for incentives for national consortia and individual researchers to work towards interoperability. We finish with concluding remarks and describe future work in section 7.

2 Interoperability

Interoperability in general, but also within CLARIN, is still a major problem. Standards and best practices¹ are of course essential for interoperability. Though inventories of standards and best practices have been made (See [here](#) and [here](#)), and some recommendations with regards to standards have been made ([Kemps-Snijders et al., 2009](#)), there is no clear guideline to member consortia and individual researchers on how to work towards interoperability nor a clear incentive for them to do so. Interoperability, however, is a crucial factor for the success of CLARIN, because the strongest motivation for researchers to invest in adhering to CLARIN requirements is if they see that they can benefit from it (for example by using CLARIN tools that apply to their data, if they are interoperable).

It is not realistic, in my view, to expect that just working on standards and best practices will bring a solution in the short term, and perhaps it will never bring a full solution. Unified standards are not necessarily the best option (because they accommodate too much, or because they accommodate too little). In addition, there are many data in legacy formats and many tools that work with legacy formats and we cannot afford to ignore them. A standard will only be successful if it is accompanied by many tools that are better or in other ways more attractive than existing tools, and that will not be easy to achieve.

Whatever may be the case, we have to be pragmatic and offer clear guidelines for interoperability in the CLARIN context and incentives to work towards it. I make a specific proposal for exactly this in this paper. I focus on interoperability between software (tools, applications, web services, etc) and data. I propose a general scheme for specifying interoperability within CLARIN, distinguishing 5 levels, and elaborate this in detail for one data type. There will be several different interoperability schemes, depending on the data type, and the aspects of the datatype being considered.

¹I will use the terms *standards* and *best practices* interchangeably, and in *standards* we include *de facto* commonly used formats etc. even if they are no officially recognized standards.

3 Interoperability Proposal

In the current paper I concentrate on interoperability between software (tools, applications, web services, etc) and data. CLARIN has to specify in detail, for a given data type, which formats it supports, and then a tool that applies to this data type is interoperable if it works on data that are in such a supported format.

We make a very specific, but tentative, proposal for this, which is mainly intended to make as clear as possible what I have in mind, and which is limited by my restricted knowledge and expertise in the matter. But I hope it can form a good starting point for the work by the *Interoperability Committee* that I propose to set up in section 6.

We distinguish formal (syntactic) interoperability from semantic interoperability and define separate requirements for them. We define different requirements for different data types (e.g. natural language text, audio, video, pictures, structured data, and possibly specific subtypes if that would be required). We identify, for each data type, a number of formats that CLARIN wants to support. We distinguish a number of priority levels (5 levels in the current proposal), where each higher level includes the lower levels and adds new requirements. The requirements may be different for input and output .

The general scheme for interoperability of software that applies to data type T is as follows:

General requirements

Multiple files The software must be able to deal with multiple files, of multiple supported formats, in hierarchical folders and in compressed files such as zip, 7z, gz, tar.gz

Basic Encoding The software must be able to deal with the CLARIN-supported encodings of the basic units of data type T

Wrapping Software that enriches data in a format F must be able to include these enrichments in a copy of the input and output the input combined with the enrichments in format F (assuming that the enrichments can be expressed in F)

This is our proposal for levels that should be distinguished:

Level 1 General requirements + internationally recognized or de facto standards / best practices

Level 2 level 1 + highly prioritized regionally / domain-specific recognized or de facto standards / best practices

Level 3 level 2 + common formats in use in everyday life

Level 4 level 3 and less prioritized recognized / de facto standards / best practices

Level 5 Level 4 and accepts CMDI metadata in combination with the data

We define labels (which could be associated to graphical ‘laundry tags as in Creative Commons’), as follows

(1) CLARIN-(FRM|SEM)-(INP|OUT)-(TXT|ATX|AUD|AV|STR) (NA|*{1,5})

with the meanings as indicated in Table 1.

So for example, the label CLARIN-FRM-OUT-AUD defines syntactic (FRM) interoperability for software yielding audio (AUD) output (OUT) in CLARIN (CLARIN).

4 Interoperability specification for natural language text

We elaborate the generic specification in detail for natural language text. We mean here

- running natural language text (so no structured numerical data in a textual format such as csv or xml)
- encoded in a textual format (so no text that is contained in a picture)

Laundry Tag	Meaning
CLARIN	It is a CLARIN interoperability specification
FRM	Concerning formal interoperability
SEM	Concerning semantic interoperability
INP	For input of data
OUT	For output of data
TXT	For natural language text
ATX	For annotations on natural language text
AUD	For audio
AV	For audio-visual data
STR	For structured data
NA	Star system not applicable
*	# Stars indicate the level: 1 .. 5, with 5 the highest level of interoperability

Table 1: Laundry tags and their interpretation

Here we formulate interoperability requirements on the natural language text only. Note that we will mention below many formats that can encode annotations on text, but this specification deals with the representation of the natural language text in such formats only, not on the annotations (separate requirements are needed for that). We formulate requirements both for input (section 4.1) and for output (section 4.2).

Though Level 1 interoperability for textual input and output is relatively easy to achieve², I submit that not a single tool or application in CLARIN already reaches Level 1 (CLARIN-FRM-INP-TXT * and CLARIN-FRM-OUT-TXT *), but I hope that I will be proven wrong.

4.1 Input

We first concentrate on *input* for software operating on text. The requirements for this are labeled in accordance with what was said above as CLARIN-FRM-INP-TXT.

General Requirements:

- the *Multiple files* and *Wrapping* requirements hold
- **Basic Encoding** = Character encoding: Unicode is obligatory, with a preference for UTF8 encoding; a Byte Order Mark should be accepted in UTF-16 encodings, and, when present, both *BigEndian* and *LittleEndian* encoding should be accepted. ISO-* and ASCII encodings are desirable, but not required.
- Plain text must be accepted in multiple varieties, to be specified by parameters:
 - Unanalysed running natural language text (the default)
 - Unit-split text, in which the units are separated from each other by a unique non-ambiguous character sequence. The parameters to specify this are a label for the unit and the character sequence separator. A number of units are recognized by the tool: token, sentence, paragraph, section, chapter, part; and if possible/relevant acted upon.
 - Labeled unit-split text: each unit distinguished can be preceded by a label separated from the unit by a unique non-ambiguous character sequence, and the label is processed as metadata on the unit.
 - Text in one or more columns in a CSV³ file, as specified by a sequence of column counters.

Level 1 General requirements + internationally Recognized or de facto Standards / best practices

²at least in comparison to interoperability of annotations on textual resources.

³or similar files with a different column separator.

TEI, XCES, CHAT, EAF, plain text.

This probably requires a more detailed specification: which variant of TEI, etc. to be decided upon after consultation of the experts and input from the NCF about actual usage in their countries

Level 2 level 1 + Regionally / domain-specific recognized or de facto standards / best practices

- FoliA (NL), TCF (DE, Weblicht), LASSY XML (NL), NAF, Prague Markup Language (PML) (CZ), TIGER-XML,

Level 3 level 2 + common formats in use in everyday life

- RTF, MSword 7, MSWord 10, OpenOffice ODT, LibreOffice ODT, PDF, CSV, ePub, HTML

It is enough here to have a mapping from these formats into plain text, with loss of lay-out features, font information, highlighting etc.

Level 4 level 3 and less prioritized recognized / de facto standards / best practices

- CES, TMX, ALTO, Shoebox / Toolbox, Tipster, RDF, CoNLL-U, CoNLL-X, Penn Treebank format, Susanne format, NEGRA format, PAULA XML (Potsdamer AUstauschformat Linguistischer Annotationen), LIF, PRAAT TextGrid.

Level 5 Level 4 and accepts CMDI metadata in combination with the data. The software reads a CMDI file and processes the actual data based on the information found in the CMDI file.

Of course, we hope that people will make and share convertors and wrappers so that no unnecessary duplication of work is done: CLARIN-NL offers web services for converting Alto, text, Word, HTML, en ePub into TEI or FOLIA. ([OpenConvert](#)) and there are open source convertors such as those of [pandoc](#) that can perhaps be used.

4.2 Output

The requirements for *output* for software operating on text are labeled in accordance with what was said above as CLARIN-FRM-OUT-TXT. They apply to software that yields natural language text in textual format as output.

The requirements are essentially the same as for input, with the following proviso's:

- There is no requirement to be able to output text in formats that are proprietary. So level 3 is easily reached once level 2 has been reached
- For level 5 the software must produce new textual data as output together with an updated CMDI file that formally describes what the software did to the original input data, and which configuration was used.

5 Audio

We define, very tentatively, the requirements for audio. The requirements for input and output are identical.

General requirements: The *Multiple files* and *Wrapping* requirements hold, but the *Basic Encoding* requirement is not defined for audio.

Level 1 General requirements plus internationally Recognized or de facto Standards / best practices

- single channel raw header-less PCM, uncompressed audio files in RIFF WAV, AIFF, or AU format. These formats are containers usually containing LPCM-encoded audio and a header that specifies properties of the LPCM encoding such as sample rate (#samples per second), bit depth (# bits per sample), endianness (order of bytes in a memory word) and number of channels. Sampling rates: 48kHz and 16kHz.

- [MPEG-1](#), [MPEG-2](#) and [MPEG-4](#)
- EAF: A file in ELAN Annotation Format ([EAF](#)) is a container encoded in XML that can contain references to media files through the `MEDIA_URL` and `MIME_TYPE` attributes of its `MEDIA_DESCRIPTOR` element. A tool must be able to deal with an EAF file if the file contains references to media files in CLARIN-supported audio formats, and then it should process these media files.

Level 2 Level 1 + regionally / domain-specific recognized or de facto standards / best practices

- [NIST format](#)

Level 3 Level 2 + level 2 + common formats in use in everyday life

- lossy formats such as [MP3](#) and [AAC](#)

Level 4 Level 3 + less prioritized recognized / de facto standards / best practices

- 8kHz sampling rate, [A-law](#) and [mu-law](#) companding,
- multiple channels

Level 5 Level 4 and accepts [CMDI](#) metadata in combination with the data. The software reads a CMDI file and processes the actual data based on the information found in the CMDI file.

6 Policy and Incentives

In this section I propose a concrete policy for CLARIN to set up and maintain activities to define interoperability and for incentives for national consortia and individual researchers to work towards interoperability.

6.1 Policy

CLARIN ERIC sets up an interoperability committee. This committee (1) makes concrete proposals concerning interoperability, in particular on a general schema for interoperability and specific instantiations of the general schema for particular data types; (2) consults the standards committee, the national coordinators and any relevant specialists in the matter, (3) recommends a particular proposal to the CLARIN BoD. It is possible (and actually very likely) that no consensus can be achieved among all CLARIN member with regard to certain matters. The Interoperability committee makes its own proposal, and includes in it any objections from national consortia or individual researchers that cannot be accommodated, and it justifies why this cannot be accommodated. The CLARIN BoD then takes a decision on making the proposal a CLARIN requirement, or to request a modified proposal from the Interoperability Committee.

The Interoperability committee should have funds to pay the work of its members and any costs for organising meetings, workshops etc., to be made available by CLARIN ERIC, from its own financial means or via external funding.

6.2 Incentives

Incentives can be implemented in many ways but I concentrate here on an implementation in terms of clearly stated targets, competitiveness, prestige and money.

The existence of clear targets and guidelines for interoperability will aid national consortia and individual developers: they know exactly what should be done, can plan for it, and can justify a national plan for doing so against reviewers by referring to the CLARIN targets.

With the star system we hope to initiate a constructive competition between individual researchers and between national consortia: everybody wants to be the best and therefore to have most stars.

We award, once a year, the individual who contributed most to interoperability in the preceding year with an Interoperability Prize, which contributes to the individual's prestige. In addition the winner will receive 500 euro in cash.

We also award, once a year, the national consortium that contributed most to interoperability in the preceding year (relative to national budget) with a prize, hence prestige, and the costs for a postdoc for one person year (for NL, this amounts to about 60k euro) to spend on a project that contributes to the CLARIN infrastructure.

It is our hope and expectation that these incentives are very attractive and will stimulate work on interoperability.

7 Concluding remarks

This paper proposed (1) a general scheme for specifying interoperability; (2) tentative specific instantiations for two data types (text and audio) of the general interoperability scheme, as illustration of the general scheme; (3) a policy to be carried out by CLARIN ERIC to ensure continued efforts on interoperability, including specific incentives for individual researchers and CLARIN national consortia.

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