To Honor our Heroes:
Analysis of the Obituaries of Australians Killed in Action in WWI and WWII

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Obituaries, Virtues and Values

Obituaries – a ritualized way to express grief
Obituaries of those killed in conflict reflect values and virtues associated with heroes.
- values, virtues, and constituents of wellbeing (VVC)
In 19th- and 20th-century wartime newspaper obituaries as metadata.
Interdisciplinary data-mining/NLP x experimental philosophy techniques.
Focus: Trove by the National Library of Australia: Australian obituaries of service personnel.

Background Work on Obits
1. Converting the scans/facsimiles into text/structured records [10-11][33-35]
3. VVCs, “lexical approach” to guide philosophical investigation [16-17].
4. Modern (deep) NN techniques [8].

Data + RQ1: places and people during these wars?

Australian Newspaper Articles from Trove:
WWI (1914-1920 inclusive) +
WWII (1939-1947 inclusive).

Obits with “killed in action” excluding Honour Rolls (list of casualties).
AccuracyHeuristic >84.5% based on the Hunspell checker.
> final total of 923 FilteredObits.

NLP Pipeline:
spaCy POS tagging: ‘ADJ’ and ‘ADV’.
NLTK tagged ‘JJ’, ‘JJR’, or ‘JJS’.
Hunspell stemming function.

Coding:
Authors manually and independently checked the list of 839 words.
712 out of 839 words agreed upon.
(Cohen’s kappa = .657, z = 19.5, p < .0001) [26]. Differences resolved by consensus.

RQ2: what VVCs correspond to the adjectives and nouns used to describe decedents’ character?

RQ3: spatial/temporal migration patterns of personnel in the war?

spaCy’s [23] Named Entity Recognition (NER)
> GeoNames API [27]

Manual correction heuristics:
Mistaken proper nouns | Mistaken names (not places) | Ambiguous locations | Documented sites of battle | Minor typos.

Rule-based rank classifier to determine personnel rank in obits for Tableau geo-vis dashboard.
Australian War Memorial [31] consulted as expert knowledge source for RQ3.

Discussion and Conclusion


Conclusion: Wide range of VVC descriptors... semantic clusters serve as objects of reflection for experimental philosophers. Much extant philosophical work employs a priori methods to sketch the virtues and values that make for a good life. This project uses a more empirical, bottom-up approach → enables ordinary people’s intuitions to speak for themselves. Useful for philosophers to reflect upon and widen the scope of potential ethical concerns beyond those generated a priori.

This poster has been edited from the presentation slides for brevity – please consult the full paper for references.