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Michael Stubbs

TEXT, INTERTEXT AND MEANING
with illustrations from Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes

In the 1920s and 1930s the Prague Linguistic Circle tackled problems such as how to explain the nature of literary language, and how to explain relations between author, text and reader. Unsolved aspects of these problems can now be tackled using methods and concepts which were not available at the time. For example, corpus-assisted methods can help to identify intertextuality and its significance for the meaning of texts. An essential empirical question is: can automatic corpus-assisted methods reliably identify cases where one text refers to other texts? Essential conceptual questions include: what is the logical relation between intertextuality and meaning?; how far does the meaning of a text depend not on what the author intended, but on how readers interpret relations between texts?; how does the concept of intertextuality relate to a network of central linguistic concepts, including reference, semantic unit, paraphrase, and evaluative language?

Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes (published 1887 to 1927) refer to identifiable texts (e.g. earlier detective stories) and allude to contemporary ideas, both scientific (e.g. the value of observational data) and pseudo-scientific (e.g. so-called "criminal anthropology"). The intellectual world of the late 1800s was created by many fiction and non-fiction texts. In turn, knowledge of these texts influences how readers understand Conan Doyle's stories. The corpus provides an ideal testing ground for assessing the possibilities and limitations of corpus-assisted analysis of intertextuality, and for contributing to the Prague School project of studying how texts relate to the social world.
