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

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Problems in explaining the nature of literary language and the relation of author to text were tackled in the 1920s and 1930s by the Prague Linguistic Circle. These problems remain unsolved, but can now be approached using methods and concepts which were not available at the time. First, corpus-assisted methods can be used to identify cases where one text refers to other texts, and thereby show that the meaning of a text depends not on what the author intended, but on how readers interpret relations between texts. Second, although the concept of intertextuality is poorly defined, it is important, because it relates to a network of central linguistic concepts, including reference, semantic unit, paraphrase, and evaluative language.

The essential empirical question is: Can automatic corpus-assisted methods reliably identify intertextual references? The essential conceptual question is: What is the logical relation between intertextuality and meaning?

Conan Doyle’s stories about Sherlock Holmes (published 1887 to 1927) provide an ideal corpus for studying intertextuality. They 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 such fiction and non-fiction texts. In turn, knowledge of these texts influences how readers understand Conan Doyle’s stories.