



SHERLOCK HOLMES OF THE 21ST CENTURY:

Intersemiotic translation in the BBC series

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Abstract. The present article aims to analyse the first episode of the British TV series *Sherlock* as an example of intersemiotic translation with regard to the multimodal conception of translation and intertextuality. The second chapter of the article is dedicated to the discussion of concepts relevant to the analysis. The notion of translation is reviewed according to the works of Roman Jakobson and Klaus Kaindl. Mode, medium and genre are introduced as essential components in the intersemiotic translation, which are closely connected and constitute a coherent whole. Furthermore, the notion of intertextuality and its place in intersemiotic translation are briefly discussed. The third chapter of the article is dedicated to the analysis of the first episode of the series *Sherlock*. It focuses on the characters of Sherlock, Dr. Watson and the killer, the main clues, and the features of multimodality introduced into the translation by the authors of the series, such as different websites of the characters and an event conducted on social media.

Keywords: intersemiotic translation, intertextuality, multimodality

21. sajandi Sherlock Holmes: intersemiootiline tõlge BBC sarjas

Abstrakt. Käesolev artikkel analüüsib esimest osa briti telesarjast „Sherlock“ kui näidet intersemiootilisest tõlkest, vaadeldud läbi multimodaalse arusaama tõlkest ning intertekstuaalsusest. Artikli teine peatükk käsitleb analüüsi jaoks relevantseid mõisteid. Tõlke mõistet käsitletakse vastavalt Roman Jakobsoni ja Klaus Kaindli töödele. Laadi, meediumi ning žanri, mis on tihedalt seotud ning moodustavad koherentse terviku, tutvustatakse kui möödapääsmatuid intersemiootilise tõlke komponente. Peale selle käsitletakse lühidalt intertekstuaalsuse mõistet ning selle rolli intersemiootilises tõlkes. Artikli kolmas peatükk on pühendatud Sherlocki telesarja esimese osa analüüsile, keskendudes Sherlocki, Dr. Watsoni ja tapja tegelaskujudele, peamistele juhtlõngadele ning multimodaalsuse tunnusjoontele, mille sarja loojad tõlkesse toovad. Viimaste hulka kuuluvad tegelastele pühendatud erinevad veebisaidid ning sotsiaalmeedias läbi viidud sündmus.



Märksõnad: intersemiootiline tõlge, intertekstuaalsus, multimodaalsus

Sherlock Holmes del Siglo 21: Una Traducción Intersemiótica en la Serie de la BBC

Resumen: Este artículo analiza el primer episodio de la serie de televisión británica "Sherlock" como ejemplo de la traducción intersemiótica. En la primera parte del artículo se discuten brevemente los conceptos relevantes para el análisis. Se revisa la noción de traducción según la obra de Roman Jakobson. A continuación, se presenta la clasificación de la traducción según Klaus Kaindl. Además, la noción de intertextualidad se ilustra con un ejemplo y se discute, se presentan diferentes opiniones sobre el intertexto y el contexto, y se mencionan diferentes herramientas de la manifestación de la intertextualidad. En la segunda parte del artículo, se presenta el episodio y se realiza el análisis. Este se centra en los personajes de Sherlock, el Dr. Watson y el asesino, las pistas principales y los rasgos de multimodalidad introducidos en la traducción por los autores de la serie, como las diferentes páginas web de los personajes y un evento realizado en las redes sociales.

Palabras clave: Traducción intersemiotica, Intertextualidad, Multimodalidad

Introduction

Sherlock Holmes is one of the most adapted fictional human characters. According to Guinness World Records, in 2012, the most adapted. He has been played by 75 different actors from different countries and, overall, appeared on screen 254 times (Guinness World Records News 2012). The first adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's work was produced as early as 1900, putting it in the first line of film adaptations worldwide. One recent adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes novels, which probably has drawn as much attention as the original itself, is the series *Sherlock*, which aired on the BBC from 2010 till 2017. Not to make any baseless allegations about its popularity, we can turn to the ratings: the third season became the most viewed British series since 2001, with ratings of up to 12.72 million people tuning in (Jones 2014). It can be assumed that the total number of people who watched the *Sherlock* series is even higher since it also aired overseas and is presented on the most popular online services, such as Amazon Prime, Netflix (until 14.05.2021), iTunes, Vudu, and Google Play. Therefore, being a successful television adaptation, *Sherlock* can serve as a great example of intersemiotic translation. In this paper, we will explore the first episode of the *Sherlock* series. We will try to analyse to which extent it refers to the original, how the main characters were translated, and which intertextual tools can be found in the product of the translation.



1. Intersemiotic translation and intertextuality

In order to define and understand intersemiotic translation, let us first refer to Roman Jakobson's classifications, which divide the process of translation into intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic types. Intralingual translation happens when we try to interpret a word with the help of words of the same language (Jakobson 1959). For example, a definition of a word in a dictionary or an oral explanation of a word to a child. Interlingual translation is the process of translating words from one language to another (ibid, 233). It is precisely what translators and interpreters do for their living. The last term was defined by Roman Jakobson as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (ibid, 233). Therefore, in his understanding, the presence of a word was essential. In this case, an example of an intersemiotic translation can be illustrations from a novel, where verbal content is changed into visual. Nevertheless, translation between non-verbal systems is also possible (Dusi Nicola 2015). For example, a theatre play can be inspired by the life of a great person, and later it can move from the stage to the screen. Here, we can see multiple intersemiotic translations: the life of someone is first translated into the language of the theatre and later into the language of cinema. None of the languages mentioned in this example are entirely verbal. Therefore, the notion of intersemiotic translation can be perceived as the most general because it encompasses all the semiotic systems, whereas intralingual and interlingual translations can be considered as its variations.

The question that is there almost every time we talk about translation is: Should the final product be exactly like the source? For a long time, the main aim of a translation was to make an exact equivalent of the original. Nevertheless, today this point of view seems out-dated (Kaindl 2020). The new goal is to translate the function of the text. The notion of the function here requires further clarification. In the functional translation approach, the text itself does not possess any inherent functions. The set of functions is established by the author; however, the receiver interprets this set independently. The set can be interpreted only partially or even differently, depending on the communicative situation of a receiver (Nord 1995). Therefore, when one talks about translating the function of the text, one should also remember that it will be translated from the point of view of the translator, who, as a recipient, can omit some of the functions initially intended by the author.

The shift from the focus on the linguistic properties of the text in translation was accompanied by the development of the notion of multimodality. According to Klaus Kaindl: "Mode, medium, and genre are three building blocks that form the basis for a translation-theoretical approach that serves to overcome the language-centeredness of translation studies" (Kaindl 2020: 57). All three of them are closely intertwined and influence the way and how the recipient perceives the text. If we go to the theatre, we assume that there will be a stage of a kind, and at least one actor presenting in person or virtually. Whereas when we go to the movies, we are not waiting for the actors to perform in front of us in real life. This is a restriction that a medium sets up. At the same time, we may want to watch a particular genre of performance. Here we understand genre as "a number of conventions, which



include topics, characters, character constellations, content, narration, as well as the discursive and formal use of modes” (Kaindl 2020: 57). The genre we have in mind can influence the medium we choose to expose ourselves to. For example, if we want to have a boost of adrenaline and watch something with a lot of explosions and people jumping off of skyscrapers, most probably we will go to the cinema. There is no doubt that theatre performance can include a great deal of elements provoking the release of adrenaline, however, it will be more than surprising for the audience to see an actor jumping off a real skyscraper as a part of a performance. Lastly, modes also rely on and determine the functioning of medium and genre to a certain extent. The notion of mode is not explicitly given in Kaindl’s article, however, he refers to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen where we can find the following definition: “Modes are semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action.” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001: 21) They are socially established, constitute a result of cultural processes, and are inseparable from the medium. The last part requires further elaboration: modes are realised within mediums, but at the same time mediums can be established as modes if they acquire their own ‘grammar’ (Kress, van Leeuwen 2001). Some mediums can use some certain modes – it may be easier to employ olfactory mode in the theatre than in cinema. At the same time, genres can also be associated with some certain modes – you cannot hear people talking in a pantomime, they use their bodies instead of verbal expressions.

Kaindl perceives mode, medium and genre as ‘building blocks’ of translation which simultaneously constitute a single coherent whole. Therefore, when we modify one building block, changes in other blocks can follow. This is particularly important when translating from one semiotic system to another, since they may seemingly vary only on the level of one ‘building block’, which may lead a translator to overlook the others. Furthermore, this introduction of mode, medium, and genre can serve as a basis for a redefinition of translation “as a conventionalised cultural interaction in which a mediator transfers texts in terms of mode, medium, and genre across semiotic and cultural barriers for a new target audience” (Kaindl 2020: 58). Moreover, Kaindl uses these building blocks as a basis for the translation taxonomy, distinguishing intermodal and intramodal, intermedial and intramedial, and intergeneric and intrageneric translations. Nevertheless, he underlines that this taxonomy does not undermine the fact that mode, medium, and genre are closely connected, and that change in one block “fundamentally affects the functional whole” (Kaindl 2020: 60).

There is yet one more ‘inter-’ to be discussed. Let us start off with an example. Imagine a person who wants to spend a good relaxing evening after a long working week and watch a movie. The choice falls onto Woody Allen’s *Match point* of 2005. For the example’s sake, we will assume that this person is unfamiliar with Dostoevsky’s masterpiece *Crime and punishment*. In this scenario, our viewer may perceive the movie as a very tragic and unfair criminal story about how a love affair can go wrong. However, after reading Dostoevsky, new features will be unlocked for the audience. The main character, who turns out to be a killer in the end, is reading *Crime and Punishment* in the first part of a movie. A short scene that does not seem to make a lot of sense until the climax, where the main character murders an old lady, who is his mistress’ neighbour, robs her, and murders his



pregnant mistress after that. This is a quite blunt, straightforward, and a little bit of a simple example of an *intertext* – a notion particularly important in the intersemiotic translation. The definition of intertextuality may vary depending on the researcher to whom one turns to seek help. Nevertheless, “the common principle is that, just as signs refer to other signs rather than directly to things, texts refer to other texts” (Dayyeh 1991: 78). If we perceive texts strictly in their literary sense, then the notion of intertextuality is limited to the boundaries of the text and does not expand to the context. However, if we perceive text in its semiotic sense, which is a double-coded entity in a constant process of communication with a reader (Lotman 1988[1981]), then the boundaries of it are broadened. Here, intertextuality embodies not only any other literary text but also a context. There are, however, opinions that intertext and context should be separated. For example, Gérard Genette introduced a term of the paratext, which was subdivided into peritext and epitext. Paratextuality stands for “conventions, that mediate the book to the reader” (Genette 1997[1987]: xviii). When these conventions are mediated within the text, it is a peritext, and outside of it – epitext. Here we would like to make a somehow blunt assumption that paratextuality can be considered a part of intertextuality. Since text is broader than just something written on paper, intertextuality also deals with non-verbal phenomena, hence with non-verbal conventions.

As we can see, texts do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by other already existing texts. In the case of the intersemiotic translation, it becomes even more evident. The text, which is translated, and the result of the translation are two formally autonomous entities possessing certain boundaries separating one from the other. At the same time, the latter is an interpretation of the former; thus, it will be influenced by the original to a greater or lesser degree and will refer to the original in some way. There are multiple ways how one text can refer to another. Since intertextuality was conceived as a literary term, the tools with which it can be manifested also belong to the literary world. Here we will mention quotation, allusion, pastiche, parody, irony, and plagiarism (Dayyeh 1991). We can assume that in cases of intersemiotic translations, some of these phenomena may be found in the product of translation.

2. Intersemiotic translation of Sherlock

The translation product to be discussed in this chapter can serve as a good example of how changes in one building block led to changes in the others. The most evident change happened in the realm of the medium: Sherlock travels from the world of the books to the TV screen. However, that inevitably brings changes in modalities (visual, audial) and some shifts in the genre which are to be discussed later.

The first episode of *Sherlock* was aired on 24 October 2010. It is a translation of the first Sherlock Holmes novel – *A Study in Scarlet*. The title of the episode is *A Study in Pink* and from the title alone, we can see that the series is in no way trying



to recreate the original with 100% accuracy. The original name of the story was proposed by Sherlock himself in the end of Chapter IV:

I might not have gone but for you, and so have missed the finest study I ever came across: a study in scarlet, eh? Why shouldn't we use a little art jargon. There's the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it. (Doyle 1887: 42)

In the original, the name underlines Sherlock's attitude towards life and crime. For him, life is colourless and crime, which happens, brings colour to it. In the series, the name connects it to the original but also underlines the fact that the series will be something new, something which is not a direct interpretation of the original book. The pink colour has nothing to do with Sherlock but relates to the victim. It serves as another clue in the plot, providing the detective with additional information about the victim's fashion habits and, therefore, her character traits. The creators of the series use the colour pink to bring in novelty and better integrate the 19th-century plot into the modern world.

The episode starts with a scene of a man having a nightmare about a military operation. The soldiers' ammunition and the setting of the room signal to a viewer that the plot will not be happening at the end of the 19th century, but in modern times and that the man is our contemporary. With the help of the context, we can conclude that the man shown to us is Dr. Watson since he served as a military doctor in the original. Therefore, the original text allows us to understand a character's background on the screen without an explicit exposition and without him even saying anything. Further, we can see a proof that the man in front of us is precisely Doctor Watson because he opens his laptop to write "The personal blog of Dr. John H. Watson." The change of newspapers for Internet media is quite common in the series. Modern Sherlock also has his own website called *The Science of deduction*. The name, which coincides with the names of the second chapter of the novel and the first chapter of the story *The sign of the Four*. This is quite an interesting example of peritext becoming an intertext. The next scene is Watson talking to his therapist, and here we can see that the character in the series will be less enthusiastic and joyful than the original one. We find further proof in a scene with Mike Stamford, where Watson is not at least joyful, if not gloomy. He did not hear Mike Stamford calling him, and he seemed detached throughout the conversation. Whereas in the original, we can see: "In old days Stamford had never been a particular crony of mine, but now *I hailed him with enthusiasm*, and he, in his turn, appeared to be delighted to see me. *In the exuberance of my joy*, I asked him to lunch with me at the Holborn, and we started off together in a hansom" (Doyle 1887: 5, my italics). Therefore, we can get the first glimpse of how Dr. Watson was translated in the series: a soldier back from the action, struggling to get back to civilian life, which causes some mental issues. As we later discover in a scene with Mycroft Holmes, these issues are caused not by the trauma from the war but by the lack of the battlefield. Further proof can be found in cab chase scene, where Watson forgets about his injuries the moment the action starts. This can illustrate that changes in mode and medium usually come with changes in content. Some features may be hard to convey by the means of writing, such as



prosodics or eye contact, for example. The visual modality of the series provides better conditions to transmit even the slightest changes in these features. Therefore, it may be assumed, that a new medium gave more opportunities for the translators to deepen the character and express some of his functions that they had perceived as the most relevant. This further transforms the genre itself. The original book did not leave a lot of space for comedic elements, however, they could be met there occasionally. The concentration of the comedic elements of the series is way denser. They reveal new sides of the characters and make them more likeable for the modern audience.

Yet another interesting allusion in the series is connected to Watson's injury. In *A Study in Scarlet* we see that Dr. Watson was injured in his shoulder: "There *was struck on the shoulder* by a Jezail bullet, which shattered the bone and grazed the subclavian artery" (Doyle 1887: 3, my italics). However, in the later works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, we can see that the wound relocates from the shoulder to his leg, for example: "More than once during the years that I had lived with him in Baker Street I had observed that a small vanity underlay my companion's quiet and didactic manner. I made no remark, however, but sat nursing my *wounded leg*" (Doyle 1890: 109, my italics). At the beginning of the episode, Watson suffers from a psychosomatic limp, but in the end, he tells Sherlock that he was shot in the shoulder. In an interview with *The Times*, *Sherlock's* showrunners Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss confirmed that this was an allusion to the inconsistency of Watson's injury in the original (Billen 2013).

After the opening titles, we see the setting for the criminal part of the plot. We can see three short stories of people taking their lives with pills and a police press conference after that, where all these cases are considered to be unrelated suicides. In the series, the murder weapon is shown to the audience straight away, whereas it is discovered only after the second murder in the book. The motivation of the murder also changes, which influences some other plot details, for example, the word 'Rache'. In the original, it was written on the wall with blood; in the series, it was written on the floor by the victim before she died. The interpretations by Sherlock also differ. The original one deduces that it is a German word for 'revenge' and casts aside Lestrade's idea that it stands for a female's name Rachel. In the modern interpretation, Sherlock immediately casts aside the version regarding the German language and comes up to the conclusion that the victim was trying to write 'Rachel', which later turns out to be a password for her phone. This is an excellent example of how an indirect reference to the original can be made. One detail is interpreted in a diametrically opposite way, which justifies motivations. The original murderer seeks revenge; the modern murderer plays with death and works for money from a 'sponsor'.

Another clue that was interpreted in a very peculiar way is the wedding ring. In the original, it belonged to Lucy Ferrier, an American lady friend of the murderer. The murderer dropped it at the crime scene, and later Sherlock used it to lure out the killer. In the series, we also can see a ring, but it does not have significant relevance for untying the mystery plot. The more relevant clues were a pink suitcase and a phone which was nowhere to be found, and which Sherlock used to 'ring' the killer and lure him out. Or, more precisely, he used Watson's mobile phone and sent a message to the victim's phone, which is yet another reference to the



original Sherlock Holmes posting an advertisement about the ring in the newspaper, under Dr. Watson's name.

Now let us move to Sherlock himself. Both characters, the original and the modern, share the same general features – they are quick-witted, intelligent, a little bit arrogant, and have a tendency for addictive behaviour. The latter is only briefly demonstrated in the episode by the scene of the drug bust at 221B and by Sherlock's phrase: "It's a three-patch problem," a reference to "a three-pipe problem" (Doyle 1891: 36). However, there is one characteristic that distinguishes modern Sherlock from the original quite significantly. When Watson and Sherlock are driving to the crime scene, the famous consulting detective explains the logic behind his assumptions about John Watson's brother:

John: How can you possibly know about the drinking?

Sherlock: *Shot in the dark. Good one, though.* Power connection – tiny little scuff marks around the edge of it. Every night he goes to plug it in to charge, but his hands are shaking. You never see these marks on a sober man's phone, never see a drunk's without them.

Here we can see an example of abductive reasoning, something which the original Sherlock is quite often accused of¹. Nevertheless, the original has never doubted the power of deduction, whereas modern Sherlock can sometimes admit that he is guessing.

Overall, we can imagine the modern Sherlock being sent back in time and successfully replacing the original one because their characters are quite similar, except for some minor details motivated by the mode of time, which places the main character in the 21st century.

The last character to be analysed here is the killer. The common features between the series and the original are his job occupation, his health, and the murder weapon. Both killers are cabmen with an aneurism, and both used pills to kill victims (except in the case of the second victim in the original, he was stabbed in self-defence). Nevertheless, the original murderer was driven by the revenge motive. He used two identical pills, poisoned and harmless, and did not know which one was deadly, relying on "justice upon the earth" (Doyle 1887: 131). In the series, we have a 'dead man walking' motivated by his desire to 'outlive' people and leave some assets to his children. He knows where the poisoned pill is, and he plays a wicked game with his victim. In the end, both killers die.

The character of the killer can be also used to illustrate the limitations posed by the new medium and modes. In the book, it takes five chapters to convey the killer's backstory and motivation. A one and a half hour episode cannot afford to spend so much time establishing the killer's identity. Therefore, it has to be revealed in the 10 minutes dialogue between Sherlock and the cabmen. Moreover, most of the information we get from a part of the dialogue, is where Sherlock is deducing the cabmen's background, and which lasts for approximately 3 minutes. It is hardly possible to tell the whole story of a person within such a short period of time; therefore, a lot of details have to be omitted. Nevertheless, the creators of the series successfully convey the most essential information about the killer's motivation.



Before we move towards the conclusion, let us consider a very peculiar feature of multimodality, which the series' authors created. They moved the series beyond the screen of the television. The websites *The Science of Deduction* and *John's blog* were created. Unfortunately, they are no longer in use today, but they were when the series was on air. The former did not have many articles, but the latter included all the cases described in the series, some of the cases not included in it, and posts from the times before Watson met Sherlock. Each case also had a comment section with comments written on behalf of the characters. There was a website with Molly Hooper's diary, but that is also no longer available today.

Another interaction with the audience happened via Twitter. The event called 'Sherlock Live' was conducted on 10 January 2017. The creators and showrunners of the series – Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss – were live-tweeting details of a case written for this special on the BBC-one account. They were tweeting in the role of Sherlock, posting some bits of information, clues, and answering other users' tweets. The event happened five days before the premiere of the final episode. Unfortunately, it is hard to say whether this event can be considered a successful advertisement campaign since the final episode was watched by 5.9 million people in Britain, which is the lowest number of viewers throughout the whole history of the series (Jackson 2017).

Conclusion

To draw the conclusion, let us straighten up everything we managed to find out by analysing the original novel and the first episode of the modern series. The intersemiotic translation of Sherlock Holmes into the modern-day world led to omitting some of the original parts of the plot. Most of the tools used by the characters were modernised, and the characters themselves were changed to fit into the 21st century. Dr. Watson does not wear a moustache anymore, and Sherlock does not wear his famous hat, not until the second season at least, and not voluntarily. And it is not only the character's form that was changed; the content was changed too. Watson became more traumatised by his war experience and more captivated by the thrill of the 'battlefield'. Sherlock became blunter and more energetic. Even the killer's motivation has changed. The episode is threaded with intertextuality. It refers not only to its original counterpart but also to other Sherlock Holmes stories. This gives an excellent opportunity for the fans to become detectives themselves to find all the 'easter eggs'. The fact that some of the latter can be found not only in the episodes but also out in the vast spaces of the Internet brings the multimodality factor into the intersemiotic translation, and increases the audience's involvement.

Overall, the first episode of BBC's *Sherlock* is an excellent example of a translation that does not restrict itself to translating only the content. It transfers the function of the original text with the help of various references and allusions, at the same time, it changes the initial medium, encompassing different modalities, and expands the genre by adding elements, non-conventional to the original



detective story. The series shows that the process of intersemiotic translation is accompanied by a certain degree of novelty. Novelty in characters, narration, and distribution.

For the past century, Sherlock Holmes has had multiple faces and various interpretations in different languages. Nevertheless, one thing stays the same, he is still the genius welcomed by people all over the world. No matter the hat.

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Notes

- 1 The example of abductive reasoning by the original Sherlock can be found in the scene where Sherlock Holmes explains the logic behind the assumption that Dr. Watson was in Afghanistan. For further reading see Carson, David 2009: *The abduction of Sherlock Holmes*.