THE BBC’s SHERLOCK SERIES: MODERNIZING TEXT STRUCTURE

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I. Introduction

The last three years have brought TV audiences on all continents back to 19th c. English literature. Or, rather, a 19th c. English literary character has brought back audiences to the TV screen. From yet another angle, film and movie producers have once again benefited from what they brand ‘old-timers’ works of fiction.

The undisputable, and undisputable, fact is that the two seasons of the BBC’s Sherlock series have managed to revive and reinvigorate mass audience interest in Conan Doyle’s works. The question in focus here is: how has the series managed to accomplish that feat? How have the authors succeeded in ‘wrapping’ what hundreds of reviewers have repeatedly termed the ‘old franchise’ into a fresher, and more viable, package? And, even more bluntly, how has the series managed to ‘sell’ so effortlessly to both audiences of prior knowledge of the literary works as well as to audiences completely unaware of who Sherlock Holmes or Conan Doyle is (yes, there are whole generations, it turns out, especially in the U.S., who have no idea either of them ever existed).

Search all kinds of media – from highest-of-brow critical reviews to popular forums - and the answer which keeps coming up over and over proves to be one and the same: writers Moffat and Gatiss’s scripts. Truly, the series plays in time to a soundtrack which has come to a life of its own – it rings and rings on the mobile phones of people all over the globe (the main theme, according to Internet sources, is one of the most frequently downloaded tunes of 2010). The direction, undoubtedly, is superb and the acting has garnered multiple awards. But all together – actors, music composer, producer, etc. – also claim it is all about the scripts.

II. Film/ Movie Scripts and Text Structure

The genre of movie scripts has rarely, if ever at all, been taken seriously by linguists. Although script writing has long been part of University curricula (as even a brief survey will prove), analysis of the genre has been generally intuitive and predominantly condescending. Script writing, first, is not thought of as ‘literature proper’ and screenplays are practically never read by anyone but film-makers. Movie scripts, moreover, are seen as nothing more but the basics, or the backbone, of a genre which relies much more heavily on media other than human language. Then, why, one may ask, the present interest in movie scripts?

For some years now, I have been wrestling in my mind with one particular notion, which by chance, incident or intent seems to pop out of nowhere and trip me at all kinds of occasions. Over and over, the same notion has blocked my way in coping with things which range from the utterly mundane (How can I re-structure my tight everyday schedule, so I can fit in the coveted dancing classes?) to the purely scientific (Why do even Halliday and van Dijk adopt the Aristotelian three-part text structure?). Then, at a gathering, a discussion of the state of modern cinema turned - for no particular reason - quite heated. Cinema had become so predictable, risk-free, reliant predominantly on re-makes, with corny scripts, and...
with directors who only knew in which direction to point the camera... The dissatisfaction had kept pouring for quite a while, when a writer suddenly threw this argument onto the fire: ‘Come on. What can we really expect from a script? Even Hitchcock said a script is simply structure. Nothing but structure!’

After an extensive survey of the literature, conducted after the above-mentioned gathering, I can safely argue that, in similarity to the claim espoused at the said gathering, practically two out of every three books or textbooks on script writing and analysis begin with the statement that a movie script is all about structure and very little else (see e.g. Gulion, Field, Internet Source 4). Subsequent conversations with professionals from the industry (personal unofficial communication) confirmed, too, that, by rule, for a movie producer to risk money on a script that script has to have structure. It may have little else but structure is a must. And if there were ever a choice between great dialogue and great structure, no movie producer would ever opt for dialogue. Cinema, it turns out, is a structure-hungry, or even structure-insatiable, business.

To film producers, however, structure turns out to be something different than the linguists’ notion of Introduction-Body-Conclusion (as in e.g. Swales; Halliday and Hasan). To film producers, ‘structure’ may be summarized to be equivalent to ‘specific things which take place on specific pages’. The following is my summation of what a good, producers’ screenplay structure is - a summation based on the 30 most popular search-based Internet and book sources as of October 2012 (see e.g. Field; Gulion; Internet sources 1, 2, 3, 4):

- ‘Pages 1-5, esp. 5: The writer should present the HOOK, or that special ‘something’ which grabs the attention and pulls viewers in.
- Page 10: The script should have the MINI CRISIS, which leads into:
- Page 17: ...The DILEMMA. Here the writer should create the main team of the movie (consisting of at least a protagonist and a sidekick) and the writer should clarify what the movie is about. Here, the script should also actualise the first major plot point, which marks the end of Act I and the beginning of the first part of Act II.
- Page 30: The writer should present the REACTION to the dilemma/ the difficult situation/ protagonist’s commitment to a cause.
- Page 45: This page should contain the first REVERSAL of the 17th-minute point. This point furthers the characters and pushes them deeper into the situation or the dilemma.
- Page 60: The TENT POLE of the movie. Where the passive characters become active or vice versa. Alternatively, it is called ‘the point of no return’.
- This is the actual middle of the script. It is also the middle of Act II.
- Page 75: What should happen here is the second REVERSAL to the 17th-minute point, which serves to reaffirm what the story is about.
- Page 90: The writer should show the LOWEST POINT of the action. This is the place of almost complete desperation, at which the goal seems unattainable for the main character(s). This also marks the end of Act II. From here on, the protagonist rises up and wins - in Act III.

(as in Tincheva, Text Structure: Movie Scripts)

Admittedly, deviations from the above prescriptions are allowed. Long fantasy scripts or historic scripts, for instance, are a case in point. The deviations, however, happen only within the limits of 3-5 pages. The dilemma point, for example, might be shifted anywhere between page 15 and page 20, but not later. Moreover, I have witnessed business professionals spread legends about a particular producer’s requirements for additional page particulars, e.g., the
notorious page 68, on which viewers’ emotional response to the later-appearing Lowest Point (i.e. p. 90) is believed to depend.

The question, then, arises of why the interest in such a prescriptive text type? If the requirements are followed closely, what are the chances that an analysis of movie script structure will yield any significant data to but confirm the existence of the requirements? This is the place for me to confess to my belief in statistical confirmation for all assumptions. Hence my leap at the possibility for me to use already-existing almost-a-century-old statistically-verified data on any text-type.

If an annoyingly conservative billions-of-dollars business vouches for the structure’s presence and viability, what is ‘only’ left for me is to try and explain why that structure exists in the form it does. And, with respect to Moffat and Gatiss’s *Sherlock* scripts, I would need to establish (a) whether they follow strictly the structural requirements, and (b) whether that is (at least part of) the explanation of their success.

So, first, let us take a closer look at my analysis of the structure of the six Sherlock screenplays from the first two seasons.

### III. Data from the *Sherlock* scripts

This Section presents results from my analysis of the structure of two of the six *Sherlock* screenplays.

The two Samples are meant to illustrate the way the structural prescriptions are realized in the actual texts from the corpus.

The other four screenplays follow the rules in quite a similar fashion. All the screenplays in the corpus prove to abide by the structural prescriptions and, as the Samples below display, existing deviations fall within what is also prescribed as acceptable limits (i.e. a span of 2-3 pages).

**Sample 1**

**Episode 3 (The Great Game):**

- p. 1 - 3 introduce us to a new case, which, however, Holmes finds too boring and does not take up.
- p. 3 - 5 show us Holmes at his most bored. He even ‘shoots’ the wall of their sitting-room. He and Watson bicker. Then a bomb goes off in the house opposite.
- p. 6 – 14 Sherlock’s brother asks him to solve a politically sensitive case. Lestrade also calls for help on the explosion case.
- p. 15 is where Holmes receives a phone call from Moriarty and embarks on saving Moriarty’s first hostage.
- p. 30 shows Holmes and Watson save the first hostage case. The second hostage situation begins.
- p. 45 – 50 detail how Sherlock saved the second hostage. Hostage 3 is killed by Moriarty. Sherlock and Watson quarrel.
- p. 60 is where Holmes faces a fraud who works with Moriarty. Meanwhile, Watson works on the politically sensitive case in Mycroft’s charge.
- p. 75, as in most TV films, is the ‘low point’. Sherlock solves Mycroft’s problem but there is no lead to help them get to Moriarty. Then Moriarty abducts Watson.
- p. 90 is where the required fade out happens.
The following is another (randomly chosen) Sample from my analysis of the corpus. The script is structured as follows:

Sample 2
Episode 4 (A Scandal in Belgravia)

- p. 1 plunges us into the cliffhanger situation Episode 3 ended on. Holmes and Watson are held hostage by their arch-enemy Moriarty.
- p. 3 - 5 show us a mystery lady who helps Holmes and Watson out of their predicament.
- p. 5 - 7 demonstrate a series of cases which Holmes and Watson solve successfully. Watson’s blog takes off as Holmes becomes an Internet phenomenon. Meanwhile, at her own place, the mystery woman from the opening scene places a phone call to a faceless person, saying it’s time for ‘things’ to start.
- p. 8 – 14 Holmes and Watson take up a special case with a backfiring ‘killer’ car.
- p. 15 – 20 show us both Holmes and Watson are summoned and transported to the Buckingham Palace, where they take another case – the one of a Belgravia extortionist.
- p. 25 - 30 show us Sherlock and Watson meet, and save, Irene Adler, the mystery woman from the opening scene, who is also the extortionist.
- p. 45 is Christmas Eve, when Adler is found dead. Holmes is affected. In the following days he doesn’t work but, instead, composes music to cope with the loss.
- p. 60 shows Holmes get hold of the extortionist’s ‘weapon’. He learns Adler is alive, though away.
- p. 75 is the ‘low point’, when Holmes sees he’s been wrong about the whole case, that Adler has played and taken advantage of him, and that that has caused Holmes to unwittingly sabotage his brother’s anti-terrorist scheme. The last face-off with Irene Adler and her master Moriarty begins.
- p. 90 is where the resolution happens and Holmes wins.

As the data from my analysis also shows, all the other four screenplays also display a compliance with the requirements. Admittedly, though, most scripts do. So, what is the structural peculiarity which ‘transported’ Sherlock into the 21st c. so successfully and transformed it into a modern as well as a mass cultural phenomenon? If it is not a deviation from the routine structural progression, then with respect to what other aspect of the all-important structure are the scripts so ‘modern’?

IV. Types of text structure in movie scripts

The answer to the above question, to me, lies in the way one defines ‘text structure’. Clearly, the ‘page requirements’ above concern the way the story progresses in terms of actions and activities, especially actions and activities performed by the protagonist. A firm cognitivist at heart, I cannot but see both ACTIONS and CHARACTERS as parts of the mental pictures one creates while reading a script, or watching a movie.

If we accept that while producing or receiving a text, a person constructs mental networks of cognitive models, then the (let us call it for now) ‘producers’ structure’ can be seen as such a network. In essence, that structure ‘contains’ CHARACTERS concepts, ACTIVITIES mental models, GOAL-related cognitive constructs, or whatever other general
term one might prefer to employ in indicating mental processing. The closest to such a treatment of text structure the literature affords is, to my knowledge, Werth’s idea of the distinction between Textual World and Discourse World.

‘Discourse World’ is defined by Werth as the situational environment of the communicative event, which ‘contains the participants and what they can see, hear, etc.’ as well as any other, often incomplete informational input the participants can still process on the basis of their previously-stored background knowledge (83). A Discourse World, consequently, can be seen as a network of cognitive constructs in which mental representations combine to build up a model of a communicative situation. In movie scripts, Discourse Worlds rarely play a significant role or, to be more precise, they are profiled only when the viewers are directly addressed through an interactive voice-over, as in, e.g., the beginning of How to train your dragon, where the voice-over directly addresses the viewer. For the present purposes, however, I mention Discourse Worlds in movie scripts only to differentiate them from Textual Worlds.

Similarly to a Discourse World, a Textual World can also be approached as a network of cognitive constructs. In contrast to a Discourse World, a Textual World is built-up of mental models of PEOPLE and OBJECTS, which function as characters and which perform activities within the fictional world (Werth: 82). Therefore, it could be argued, the producers’ perception of structure actually pertains to the Textual World of the script.

The results from my previous work on the structure of text-types within the political domain (Tincheva, Political Speeches) confirm that the structure of some text-types results from the metaphoric mapping of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema. The structure of political speeches, for example, uses direct mappings of the three parts of the image schema, incorporating additional cognitive constructs from the Discourse World and the Real World networks and resulting into the text-type’s INITIAL STATE – STEPS – DESIRED STATE structure. In other words, every political speech proves to start with an explanation of the initial (most frequently present-time) state of affairs, which contains a political/social problem. The speech then ‘moves’ through a description of the STEPS which, if taken, should lead to the solution of the problem. Then the speech ends with a description of a desired state of political/social affairs, in which the problem no longer exists or is mitigated.

The ‘protagonist’ in that structure is the state and is almost exclusively constructed as a BODY (which in itself results from the operation of the STATE IS A BODY metaphor). The HEAD of the STATE-BODY most frequently is the president; the common people, or citizens, tend to be constructed as other parts of the body, e.g. HANDS.

Thus, the underlying cognitive construct controlling the text-type’s structure (i.e. INITIAL STATE- STEPS- DESIRED STATE), first, prescribes how one should construct a political speech. Second, it tells the text receiver what to expect on hearing a political speech. If the text presents a DESIRED STATE or if it skips the STEPS because the speaker has no idea on how the problem should be solved, the break away from the structural expectations would create the intuitive ‘feeling’ of incompletion of the text.

What is of relevance to the present discussion of movie scripts, however, is the fact that all above-mentioned structural specificities are associated with the Textual World of political speeches. In other words, the INITIAL STATE- STEPS- DESIRED STATE structure is what holds together their Textual World only. Moreover, not all text-types display such closeness to the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema’s three parts (e.g. poems and news items). Neither is the structure of the Textual World the only kind of structure in a text-type.

As I have argued elsewhere (Tincheva, Text Structure: Movie Scripts), movie scripts are one of those text-types whose Textual World structure proves isomorphic with the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL construct. First of all, in correspondence to the three parts of the image schema, in a movie script structure, there are three Acts. Act I (similarly to INITIAL STATE in
political speeches) has the protagonist face a problem and focus on a GOAL to be achieved. Act II (similarly to STEPS in political speeches) demonstrates how the protagonist moves ‘step by step’ towards the solution of the problem or the achievement of the GOAL. Here, importantly, each scene, or event, corresponds to one STEP along the ‘way’ to solving the problem. Act III is dedicated to the DESIRED STATE, in which the GOAL is achieved by the protagonist.

An important point to note is that Act II, by rule, is sub-divided into two parts, each of which is of length no different from the length of Act I and Act III. Then, it seems safe to argue, the first Section of Act II should and easily could be seen as Act II, while the second Section becomes Act III. Then, however, the actual Act III should be termed ‘Act IV’, which, quite revealingly, is avoided. The structuring power of the three-part SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image-schema is so strong that people ‘feel’ it would be ‘unnatural’ to delimit an ‘extra’, fourth Act, even if that structural component exists.

Another issue with respect to Act I, II and III is the question of where they ‘belong’. If a movie script’s Textual World is divided into three conceptual chunks which correspond to SOURCE, PATH and GOAL (and those are conceptual divisions which ‘contain’ mental models such as CHARACTERS and ACTIONS), then where do the language signal divisions into Acts belong? While CHARACTERS and ACTIONS are part of the Textual World, ‘Acts’ seem to be of different order and nature.

Starting from the fact that the three Acts inherited from theatrical plays are actually written in that text-type (even if they are not in movie scripts), we could try and associate the Acts with the so-called ‘overall’ text structure. Previously, I have employed the term to designate the organization of the language signal in terms of language bits smaller than the whole text but larger than a sentence. The term helps refer to phenomena such as paragraphing or, in the case of scripts, separate scenes and paragraphs within the scenes.

Paraphrasing, admittedly, is a highly subjective kind of organization of the language signal. A sentence may close a paragraph by suggesting some of the elements the following paragraph will be dedicated to; alternatively, the same sentence may be the one opening the next paragraph. Where the sentence belongs and if there will be any paragraphing at all, is often a matter of the linguistic skills of the text producer, as so many student papers prove. In the case of political speeches, the analysis of the corpus reveals, each paragraph really tends to be associated with the mental representation of a separate STEP along the political PATH. However, that is not always the case. Additionally, in the Textual World, the STEPS prove to follow a chronological order, while sometimes the paragraphs go back and forth in time and space. If paragraph boundaries really do supply indications as to structural transitions, then there must exist yet another type of structure – a structure which acts belong to.

Similarly to the issue of explaining paragraphing techniques, any structural analysis should also be able to account for textual subdivision such as chapters, sections, scenes, etc. Such patterns and mechanisms of arrangement of the linear language signal would not exist, if they did not perform a unique function related to information processing – a function no other linguistic structure performs. Therefore, the logical question here would be: what kind of structure do chapters, sections, scenes and paragraphs express? What cognitive structuring principle do they reflect? Both questions, again, seem to suggest that there must exist yet another type of structure – a structure which acts, sections, paragraphs, etc., express.

Another notion I have previously resorted to (ibid.) is that of superstructure. The term indicates the ongoing progression of a text and can be postulated as a three-dimensional network of cognitive constructs built through the text. Superstructure can also be seen as resulting from the consecutive mental spaces (term as in Fauconnier) which are successively organised in a person’s mind. A major linguistic confirmation that such ongoing cognitive structuring exists are clauses and sentences. Acts, sections and paragraphs, too, can be argued
to ensue from the existence of superstructure. Moreover, it is a text’s superstructure which functions as an interface between the general structure of the Textual World and the linguistic mechanisms for explicating that Textual World. It is the kind of structure which ‘translates’ the Textual World into paragraphs and scenes.

The difference between an INITIAL STATE - STEPS - DESIRED STATE Textual World structure and a text’s superstructure is that while the first one is linear, the second one does not necessarily follow any chronological or spatial ordering. To illustrate my point, my personal experience shows people do not retell stories (or movies) non-chronologically. Truly, sometimes people do try to recount a movie the way they experienced it – through flashbacks and interrupted narration - but they, at least in my experience, always give up and start retelling the story over, this time in chronological order. ‘Retelling’, then, it is safe to assume, means ‘describing the Textual World of the story’, the way it is ‘stored’ in one’s background knowledge as a frame (term as in Shank and Abelson). In other words, people do not retain and are not normally capable (see e.g. Fuksas) of re-activating a superstructure. What they are quite capable of calling up from their memory is the chronologically-organised Textual World cognitive structure.

The fact that the storytelling technique of shifting back and forth in time does exist, however, is sufficient proof of the existence of a third-order text structure different from the Textual World structure and the overall text structure – namely superstructure. It is precisely superstructure which controls the ‘flashbacking’, no unity-of-place-and-time structuring device we see so often in movies and novels.

V. Conclusion

Going back to the Sherlock series, the analysis of the corpus proves that what structurally differentiates them from earlier screen versions of the books is their utilization of superstructure. No matter how trite it seems to be to say that they employ non-linear storytelling techniques, that proves to be the case. While older versions avoided flashbacks and non-linearity, even when the original stories were told through memories and accounts of past events (as in e.g. The Hound of the Baskervilles), not one of the six scripts of the present-day series prefers a coincidence between Textual World structure and superstructure. It can be even argued that all six scripts try for maximum divergence between Textual World structure and superstructure. The last question is whether that is not the general case for all modern movie storytelling.

The answer to that question seems to lie in the notion of ‘cognitive load’. The divergence between Textual World structure and superstructure means that a text receiver or a movie-goer would have to move back and forth repeatedly not only in terms of time and space but also between the two types of text structure. In order to understand, i.e. to decode plausibly the chunk of the movie s/he is currently viewing, the product receiver needs to ‘attach’ the superstructural chunk currently processed to its right place in the Textual World. Does what I’m watching/reading now ‘happen’ in the past, or in the future? Is it real or a dream? Should what I’m watching/reading be interpreted from the protagonist’s point of view or from that of the sidekick? The greater the number of the cognitive operations that need to be run in order for the text/movie to be comprehended, the greater the cognitive load, and - as audience reactions over the globe have proved – the greater the ‘interest’ value of the text/movie.

And here comes my final answer to the Sherlock series question: Moffat and Gatiss’s scripts have managed to burden us, viewers, with the perfect amount of cognitive load needed for the movies to be digested, comprehended, experienced, etc. Several cognitive links
between the Textual World and the superstructure less, and the scripts might not have been ‘felt’ to be ‘challenging’ enough. Several links more, and the scripts might have resembled too closely two of my favourite movies – the Nolan brothers’ Inception and The Prestige. Wonderful as both movies are, Inception and The Prestige are often quoted as ‘incomprehensible’ to the general audience of now. The Sherlock series, however, have managed to avoid that, and the two facts together may be telling us volumes about the modern human mind. What is the right amount and how it can be calculated is the object of another – empirical – investigation.

**Works Cited:**


**Internet Sources:**

4. [https://www.scriptpipeline.com/home](https://www.scriptpipeline.com/home)
One such recreation is BBC's Sherlock, a televised mini-series based on Doyle's works. I started watching the show after hearing the rave reviews of many of my friends, and I was enamored with it before the end of the first episode. I was first drawn in by the fascinating characterization of Sherlock himself. He is not at all your standard hero - in fact, he's really not a hero at all. BBC's Sherlock is tactless, abrasive, arrogant, unsympathetic, and astoundingly brilliant. Everywhere he goes, he leaves a trail of indignant, grudgingly awestruck people in his wake. The mys