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CLUE-BEARING LEXICAL UNITS IN DETECTIVE FICTION AND THE CHALLENGES OF THEIR TRANSLATION

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Abstract. A hat with a missing elastic and a bell cord that looks ordinary pose a similar problem for the literary translator. In each scene, a reader can see the object before understanding why it matters. This article examines how that interval between observation and explanation can be preserved in English–Uzbek translation. It presents a qualitative close reading of six lexical units in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” and “The Adventure of the Speckled Band.” For each unit, the analysis compares possible Uzbek renderings at the point of first disclosure and tests them against a later passage. The examples reveal three distinct difficulties. A general word can erase the physical property on which a deduction depends. A more specific word can disclose what a character has yet to discover. A word that accurately identifies an object can also break a connection between two scenes. The most resistant example is the word band, whose associations with a group of people and a strip encircling the head are distributed across different words in Uzbek. A partial solution is to retain the visible pattern and allow a witness’s interpretation to carry the competing possibility. The study identifies what each proposed rendering preserves, what it costs, and where that cost becomes apparent on rereading.

Keywords: detective fiction, lexical equivalence, literary translation, narrative clues, English–Uzbek translation

Introduction

In “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” a reader learns that part of a hat fastening is missing. It matters whether the Uzbek narrator says that the elastic is absent or that it has snapped. The first statement records what Watson can see. The second already supplies part of the history that Holmes will construct for him. A translation can thus give a recognisably accurate account of a hat while changing the dialogue that follows.

For translators working into Uzbek, the choice of vocabulary also belongs to a broader debate about the language’s expressive resources. On 21 October 2019, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan issued Decree No. PF-5850 on enhancing the prestige and status of Uzbek as the state language [1]. Decree No. PF-6084 of 20 October 2020 subsequently approved a concept for developing Uzbek and improving language policy over the period 2020–2030. Its priorities include enriching the language and strengthening its use in education and scholarship [2]. These documents establish a context for studying how Uzbek can convey fine distinctions in literary prose. The criteria for judging a particular rendering, however, come from the source passage and the possibilities available in Uzbek.

Seago observes that crime writers can distribute a clue across a network of expressions, leaving readers to notice connections among details that initially appear incidental [3]. This account has consequences for the size of the unit a translator must examine. A noun may be unremarkable in its first sentence and indispensable several pages later. Baker’s treatment of lexical, textual and pragmatic equivalence helps distinguish three questions that a dictionary entry alone cannot settle. What does the expression name? Which other expressions does it recall? What can a reader reasonably infer from it here [4]?

The two Doyle stories examined below [5] bring those questions into different relations. In one, Watson handles an object before Holmes interprets its condition. In the other, a dying woman’s words pass through a survivor’s account before the narrator sees what she may have meant. The first scene gives priority to observation. The second makes a character’s interpretation part of the evidence.

The study addresses two questions. Which features of the selected expressions allow a reader to reconstruct an inference across passages? When English and Uzbek distribute these

features differently, which translation choices preserve the distinction between a detail, a character’s interpretation of it and the eventual explanation?

Materials and methods

The material comprises two complete stories in the electronic edition of The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes listed in reference [5]. Six expressions were selected purposively, three per story. Inclusion required an identifiable first context, a later passage that altered or explained the expression’s significance, and at least two plausible Uzbek formulations with different consequences for interpretation. Generic detective terminology such as the word investigation fell outside the sample. Such vocabulary may identify a genre without carrying any information that helps reconstruct a particular case.

The unit of analysis was an expression in a pair of contexts. A compound counted as one unit when its parts named a single item. A modifier and noun were treated together when the modifier supplied the relevant evidence. For example, the substance designated by tallow matters only because it is present as a mark on something else. Conversely, a later expression naming the source of a mark served as contextual evidence for the analysis and did not increase the sample size.

For each item, the first pass recorded what the narrator or witness could describe at the moment the expression appeared. The second pass located the point at which that detail entered an argument or acquired a new referent. Two Uzbek versions were then compared by back-glossing their relevant difference into English. One test removed the later explanation and asked what each version already committed the speaker to. A second restored the explanation and asked whether its reasoning could still be traced to the earlier wording. These are interpretive tests of the text. They yield no measurements of actual readers’ predictions.

All Uzbek wording, including sentence-length illustrations, was prepared for this analysis. The comparisons concern translation options and do not attribute an error or a particular decision to a published Uzbek translator. Story titles, scene descriptions and short lexical anchors identify the passages independently of the pagination of the online edition.

Results

The six lexical decisions

Table 1 records the smallest difference that affected interpretation in each comparison. The entries are lexical anchors. Their grammatical forms vary in the sentence-length examples below. The two alternatives in each row sometimes preserve different parts of the same clue.

English anchor	Proposed Uzbek wording	Alternative	Consequence of the alternative
hat-securer	shlyapani tutib turadigan bog‘ich	shlyapa tasmasi	Could denote the decorative hatband.
elastic	rezinka	uzilgan rezinka	Assigns a cause to the observed absence.
tallow stain	yog‘ dog‘i	sham yog‘ining dog‘i	Identifies a candle as the source earlier in the explanation.
bell-rope	qo‘ng‘iroq ipi	soxta qo‘ng‘iroq ipi	Discloses the result of Holmes’s inspection.
ventilator	havo tuynugi	ventilyator	Can suggest a powered appliance in a scene involving an opening.
speckled band	ola-bula tasma	ola-bula to‘da	Sustains the human reading but impedes the final visual recognition.

Table 1. Lexical alternatives from the hat examination and the Stoke Moran investigation [5]. All Uzbek renderings are proposed translations.

The first two rows refer to different things. The fastening is an accessory whose surviving parts show that it was fitted. The elastic is a component that is now missing. A translation that calls both simply a strap can leave the reader with the impression that the same object is both present and absent. The distinction becomes consequential when Holmes reconstructs two moments in the owner’s conduct.

The last row differs from the others. An adjective or a descriptive phrase can make a hat fitting or an air opening sufficiently clear. No single head noun among the Uzbek alternatives tested here carries the two senses required of band. The later discussion therefore evaluates their costs across the title, the witness’s account and the final scene.

An accessory and its missing part

In the hat scene, the surviving fitting is evidence of a purchase. Holmes assumes that someone wanted a way of keeping an expensive hat on in the wind. He then notices that the elastic has gone unreplaced. The story uses these successive observations to build a comparison between the owner’s earlier care and his present habits [5]. Whether the comparison convinces a modern reader is a separate question. A translation must first give readers enough information to consider the argument for themselves.

The compact shlyapa tasmasi has a particular disadvantage here. A silk band is also mentioned when Holmes discusses the quality of the hat. Using tasma indiscriminately could make the decorative band appear to furnish the evidence for foresight. Shlyapani tutib turadigan bog‘ich introduces the fitting by its job. The phrase is longer, but bog‘ich can stand alone once the object has been introduced. A more elaborate description of where the owner placed the cord on his body would add a detail that Watson’s first inspection does not establish.

The distinction between absence and damage is easier to hear in a complete sentence. A possible rendering of the first observation is “Shlyapa soyabonida bog‘ich uchun teshik bor edi, ammo rezinkasi yo‘q edi.” The words yo‘q edi say only what Watson sees. A shorter narrative might say “Rezinkasi uzilib ketgan edi.” This is fluent Uzbek, but it assigns a history to the missing part. The cause is precisely what Holmes later claims to know.

Uzbek also offers rezinkasi qolmagan edi, which suggests a transition from presence to absence without naming how it occurred. That formulation would suit a narrator looking back on an object whose previous condition is established. In Watson’s inventory, yo‘q edi keeps the report closer to the moment of inspection. The strength of the simple verb lies in the unanswered question it leaves for his interlocutor.

What the stain can establish

A mark made by tallow offers a different difficulty. Holmes moves from the substance on the hat to the likelihood that the owner often carries a candle and then to a conjecture about the lighting in his home. He considers how many marks are present and allows that one or two might have appeared by accident [5]. The evidence is cumulative. Both what the

marks are made of and how often the same contact appears to have occurred contribute to the reasoning.

Yog‘ dog‘i gives an Uzbek reader an immediately intelligible mark, although yog‘ covers oils and fats from several sources. Sham yog‘ining dog‘i makes the candle association accessible earlier. Here the cost of that addition is limited by its location. The detailed identification occurs in Holmes’s explanation, where a candle is about to enter the argument. The same wording would do more damage in Watson’s preliminary inventory, where the marks are less precisely characterised. A single preferred equivalent for both passages would obscure an intentional change in specificity.

A third possibility, hayvon yog‘idan qolgan dog‘, marks the material distinction more explicitly. Its analytical register draws attention to the substance, while the animal origin alone supplies little reason to think of household lighting. An English gloss such as “animal-fat mark” reveals the difficulty. The phrase is narrowly descriptive yet leaves the historical connection for the reader to supply. Sham mumi is an attractive everyday expression, but it suggests wax and suppresses the distinction in material signalled by tallow.

A workable progression in Uzbek is to begin with dog‘lar in Watson’s inventory, allow Holmes to call them yog‘ dog‘lari, and bring in the candle when he reconstructs the owner’s movements. Retaining the difference between an isolated mark and several similar marks is at least as important as selecting the noun. Without the contrast in number, Holmes appears to derive a settled domestic habit from a single accident. In this case, accuracy is distributed across the vocabulary of a paragraph.

A cord that names an expected function

In the bedroom at Stoke Moran, a familiar object name establishes a reasonable expectation. A bell cord should summon someone when it is pulled. The room’s occupant has had little occasion to use it, and its appearance has given her no particular reason to question the label. Only after an inspection does Holmes observe that it has no connection to the wire [5]. The first designation belongs to the household’s ordinary understanding of the room.

Qo‘ng‘iroq ipi lets a reader identify the object by its apparent purpose. The later

observation can then be rendered “Ipni tortsa ham, qo‘ng‘iroq chalinmaydi. Ip simga ulanmagan.” The first sentence states the practical result. The second gives the basis for it. By comparison, qo‘ng‘iroq buzilgan would direct attention towards a fault in the bell mechanism. A bell that needs repair and a cord never connected to it raise different questions about the room.

The nearby ventilator produces the reverse problem. Here a close-looking Uzbek word, ventilyator, can evoke a fan with moving parts. Readers who picture an appliance will have to revise the object itself when Watson discusses the size of the opening. Havo tuynugi establishes an aperture and allows the later description to specify where it opens. Hovliga ochiladigan tuynuk would furnish a plausible domestic detail, but the direction would contradict the subsequent examination. Even the more general deraza introduces an expectation about an opening’s construction that the scene does not require.

Together the two nouns show why the same translation instruction cannot be applied mechanically. Giving the cord a functional name preserves a character’s expectation, even though that expectation proves mistaken. Giving the opening a functional name works only if the target noun also preserves its physical form. The translator needs to know which property the later passage actually tests. In one case the test concerns what happens when the cord is pulled. In the other it concerns what the opening connects.

One dying phrase and two possible referents

The most difficult item is also the most visible because it appears in the title. A dying woman refers to something speckled. Helen later wonders whether her sister meant a group of people and connects the description with patterned head coverings. In the final scene, Watson sees what appears to be a patterned strip around a man’s forehead. As it begins to move, the earlier description acquires its final referent [5]. The sequence works because the word band can suggest a group in one context and a narrow encircling shape in another.

Ola-bula tasma gives the title a concrete visual image and can recur naturally when Watson describes the forehead. Its weakness emerges when Helen proposes the collective interpretation. Uzbek tasma supplies no ordinary lexical route to a group of people. Ola-bula to‘da reverses the difficulty. It prepares the conjecture about people, yet the final repetition

now asks a reader to recognise a group where Watson sees a single shape. It also gives Helen’s conjecture a sharper and potentially more disparaging tone. A translation must account for the fact that the suspicion originates with a character and concerns people against whom the story already directs suspicion.

One possible compensation keeps Ola-bula tasma as the title but allows Helen to associate the pattern with something worn by the people she remembers. An illustrative line is “Balki singlim ularning boshidagi ola-bula ro‘mollarni nazarda tutgandir?” The repeated adjective supplies a route from the dying phrase to the witness’s recollection. Its price is precise. In this Uzbek version the connection rests on a visible pattern, while the English witness also draws support from the noun’s collective sense.

A more elliptical dying utterance, “Ola-bula… ana u ola-bula…,” defers the choice of a head noun. It is credible as interrupted speech, yet weakens the verbal echo of the title and makes the witness sound less articulate. The choice therefore depends partly on where exact recurrence matters most. For a translation retaining the title’s physical image, the adjective repeated in Helen’s conjecture offers a recoverable connection without giving her knowledge of the final referent.

Discussion

Across the six cases, the direction of the error matters as much as its size. A broad term for a stain can leave readers with too little information to understand a deduction. A precise adjective attached to the cord gives them too much information before Holmes examines it. Both versions might seem acceptable in an isolated vocabulary exercise. Their different costs emerge only when the first and second passages are read together. This finding extends Seago’s account of lexical cohesion in crime fiction [3] to the practical problem of deciding when an Uzbek equivalent should become more specific.

Baker’s distinction between lexical and pragmatic equivalence [4] also helps explain an apparent inconsistency in the analysis. The long descriptive phrase for the hat fitting supplies additional words without disclosing an additional deduction. Conversely, a single word expressing breakage adds a causal claim to Watson’s observation. Counting words added or omitted would miss this difference. A more informative comparison asks who

could reasonably know the additional content at that point. Watson can see that a fastening belongs on the brim. Its history remains Holmes’s account to give.

For a translator revising a manuscript, the clearest test is to read the earlier sentence a second time from the position of someone who has yet to encounter the explanation. With the bell cord, ask what the reader would expect to happen if it were pulled. With the hat, ask which feature still exists and which part has disappeared. With the title phrase, ask whether Helen can plausibly arrive at her conjecture using words the reader has already encountered. If a later speech merely repeats what the Uzbek narrator has already asserted, the first rendering deserves reconsideration.

The study is limited by its purposive sample, its focus on a single author and its use of proposed translations. No reception data establish which phrase contemporary Uzbek readers would picture first. A useful empirical extension would present alternative first passages to different readers, ask for a description of the object or an interpretation of the witness’s words, and only then show the explanation. Such a design could distinguish a difficulty predicted by close reading from one that readers actually experience.

Conclusion

A clue-bearing lexical unit does two jobs at different moments. It gives a scene enough detail to be intelligible on first reading, and it gives a later explanation something specific to return to. In the hat episode, the Uzbek wording needs to distinguish an accessory from its missing component and a mark from its possible source. In the bedroom scene, the name for a cord must sustain an ordinary expectation until the scene itself overturns it. For both objects, a simple word can carry the evidence provided that the surrounding sentences preserve the order of discovery.

The title phrase marks the limit of word-level substitution. Each Uzbek head noun tested here favours one reading of band. Repeating the pattern adjective and allowing Helen’s recollection to motivate the human interpretation retains part of the effect at the cost of the original pun. Making this loss explicit permits a more exact judgement of the translation. Its success can be assessed at the point where the reader revisits the witness’s words and understands both why she formed her hypothesis and why the final scene changes

it.

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