The turns of Translation Studies

Mary Snell-Hornby
University of Vienna

From today's viewpoint, the concept of the "turn" within the context of language studies probably recalls the "pragmatic turn" which took place in linguistics during the 1970s. This is now seen as a clear swing from the abstract and rigid dogmas of transformational generative grammar, which ruled out all aspects of "extralinguistic reality", to the more practical, open and flexible approach which viewed language as action in relation to the world around and especially to the situation concerned. One of its major forces was the then revolutionary speech act theory. The process continued with the inclusion of social and communicative aspects of language and the emergence of text linguistics, all of which paved the way for the future discipline of Translation Studies*.

The concept of the "turn" is a metaphor taken from everyday English. Figurative language is not unusual in English-speaking academic discourse, but it relies by nature on associations based on common consensus, which can however vary with the individual user or reader, is hence "fuzzy" and should not be misunderstood as unambiguous terminology. The many definitions of the lemma *turn* found in standard English dictionaries and the ensuing potential for misunderstanding are discussed in Snell-Hornby 2009: 42–43 (see too Bachmann-Medick 2007: 27–33). The concept of the "turn" as understood here is ideally a paradigmatic change, a marked "bend in the road" involving a distinct change in direction, as was the case with the "pragmatic turn". This does not mean however that every change is a "turn": the image is not compatible, for example, with a simple adjustment of strategy or method, the inclusion of some extra component or the mere use of different materials. A "turn" is dynamic and can only be assessed as such in retrospect, whereby a change of direction is perceived as being clearly visible and striking, perhaps even amounting to a redefinition of the subject concerned.

1. The cultural turn

During the post-war decades, before the emergence of Translation Studies as a discipline in its own right, translation was viewed as a subdivision of comparative literature on the one hand (literary translation) and linguistics on the other (technical*, commercial* or specialized translation). The latter was aligned to the scientific categories of linguistics, concentrating on the concept of equivalence between items, especially words, of the target language (TL) and those of the source language (SL). SL items were clearly the point of reference with which TL items were to be equivalent (and hence the approach was subsequently described as "retrospective").

Towards the end of the 1970s two groups of scholars developed a "prospective" view of translation which concentrated, not on the source text, but on the status and the function of the translation in the target culture. These two groups, the one centred in the Netherlands and Israel round Gideon Toury (Descriptive Translation Studies*, concentrating initially on literary translation, cf. Hermans 1985), the other in Germany round Hans J. Vermeer (see Functionalist approaches*) worked independently of each other, but in the mid-1980s they both presented insights which had a striking amount in common, including the emphasis on the cultural context of the translation rather than the linguistic items of the source text (cf. Snell-Hornby 2006: 47–56).

The work of the German scholars was described in a paper given in July 1988 at a conference in Warwick (Snell-Hornby 1990). In their Introduction to the (meanwhile much-discussed) volume of essays arising from this event (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990), the editors used the term "cultural turn" – with reference to the work in Germany – as the key concept:

> The contributions in this volume have all taken the 'cultural turn' advocated by Snell-Hornby, which explains (...) why certain new categories (...) will be introduced. The 'cultural turn' also explains why this volume, as opposed to so many others in the field, displays a remarkable unity of pirpose. All contributions deal with the 'cultural turn' in one way or another, they are so many case studies illustrating the central concept of the collection.
> (Lefevere & Bassnett 1990: 4)

It is legitimate to say that the term "cultural turn" in Translation Studies dates back to these words, and it has meanwhile become one of the central concepts of the discipline (for other concepts of culture see Sewell 1999). It is moreover the most marked "turn" the discipline has yet taken, in the prototypical sense of a clear swing from a source-text oriented, retrospective, 'scientistic' approach to one that is prospective, functional and oriented towards the target-text recipient. In the volume edited by Bassnett and Lefevere the reference is mainly to literary translation, including post-colonial literature* and gender-based Translation Studies (see Gender in translation*).

2. The "turns" of the 1990s

From today's viewpoint of 2010 we can say that the cultural turn of the late 1980s is an undisputed milestone in the discipline, while the ensuing "turns" of the 1990s and the early years of the new century may still need the distance of time for their ultimate confirmation. Looking back to the 1990s from the perspective of the years that immediately followed however, there were two outstanding trends that unquestionably brought about radical changes in the discipline. The one came from without, the other from within.

The outside influence was the process of globalization*, along with breath-taking developments in information technology and hence worldwide communication, which have revolutionized many aspects of modern life and brought radical changes for the language industries. This has been called the "globalization turn".

For centuries the translator had been viewed as a solitary figure working in isolation, pondering over words and sentences. Within a few years his/her workplace was then transformed by terminological databanks, MT-systems, the Internet with its attendant tools and all the other technological developments that are still being updated at an ever-increasing rate (see Computer-aided translation*; Machine translation today*). All this has revolutionized our speed and mode of communication – also our concept of text or "language material". With regard to translation we could summarize some basic changes as follows:

1. Developments in telecommunication and the increased use of global English have made some forms of translation obsolete: formal business correspondence has in part given way to informal e-mailing or the use of mobile phones.
2. The need for speedy processing along with the levelling of culture-specific differences within the technological "lingua franca" leads to greater potential for machine(-aided) translation (as in the form of "gisting" for insider information).
3. Multimedia communication has created new text types (e.g., audiovisual or multi-semiotic), where verbal signs interact with pictorial images or icons: this has already been discussed as the "iconic turn" (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2007).

The other "turn" of the 1990s has been described as the "empirical turn". After decades of strictly theoretical debate on the one hand versus purely practical reports on the other, there came the call for scholarly and scientific research based on empirical studies: for translation in the form of "think-aloud protocols"* (TAPs) and for interpreting in the form of extensive and concrete case studies (cf. Gile 1994, for examples of case studies see Snell-Hornby 2006: 116–122). This led to intense activity in the field of Interpreting Studies*, which had hitherto been given too little attention (and that was limited mainly to conference interpreting), and during the 1990s Interpreting Studies clearly emerged as a subdiscipline in its own right, further enriched by work in dialogue or community interpreting* in diverse settings (especially the courtroom, hospital or police station), as based on abundant empirical research. With increasing migration, dialogue interpreting is certain to be of crucial importance in the coming years (cf. Cronin 2006: 52 ff.).

3. The "turns" of the new century?

As indicated above, a disciplinary "turn" can only be perceived and defined as such after it is already complete, and it is still too early to make final pronouncements on the "turns" of the last few years in Translation Studies. The most promising candidate is the "sociological

turn" (cf. Bachleitner & Wolf 2004, Wolf & Fukari 2007; see also Sociology of translation*), which had however already been anticipated in previous decades (cf. Gouanvic 1997). The sociological approach follows naturally from the expansion of the (inter)discipline into its neighbouring areas and overlaps with many issues such as ethics* and cultural identity with the attendant need for multilingualism*, particularly in relation to the overwhelming dominance of English worldwide. These topics will certainly occupy translation scholars for some time to come.

It is interesting that the concept of the "turn" is currently enjoying great popularity, particularly in the neighbouring field of cultural studies (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2007). The variations on the topic include the notion of a "translation turn" (see too Bassnett 1998 and Snell-Hornby 2006: 164–160), but it is debatable whether this is at present pure theory or wishful thinking within the scientific community. For the time being it seems that a discussion on which developments still in progress in Translation Studies may prove to be paradigmatic changes – and are hence potential "turns" – cannot go beyond the field of speculation.

References

Bachleitner, Norbert & Wolf, Michaela (eds). 2004. *Soziologie der literarischen Übersetzung.* Special issue of *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 29 (2).

Bachmann-Medick, Doris. 2007. *Cultural turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften.* Reinbek: Rowohlt.

Bassnett, Susan. 1998. "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies." In *Constructing Cultures. Essays on Literary Translation.* Susan Bassnett & André Lefevere (eds), 123–140. Topics in Translation 11. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Bassnett, Susan & Lefevere, André (eds). 1990. *Translation, History and Culture.* London: Pinter.

Cronin, Michael. 2006. *Translation and Identity.* London: Routledge.

Gile, Daniel. 1994. "Opening up in Interpretation Studies." In *Translation Studies. An Interdiscipline*, Mary Snell-Hornby, Franz Pöchhacker & Klaus Kaindl (eds), 149–158. Benjamins Translation Library 2. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Gouanvic, Jean-Marc. 1997. "Pour une sociologie de la traduction: le cas de la littérature américaine traduite en France après la Seconde Guerre mondiale (1945–1960)." In *Translation as Intercultural Communication. Selected Papers from the EST Congress – Prague 1995*, Mary Snell-Hornby, Zuzana Jettmarová & Klaus Kaindl (eds), 33–44. Benjamins Translation Library 20. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Hermans, Theo (ed.). 1985. *The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation.* London: Croom Helm.

Sewell, William J. 1999. "The Concept(s) of Culture." In *Beyond the Cultural Turn. New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, Victoria E. Bonnell & Lynn Hunt (eds), 35–61. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Snell-Hornby, Mary. 1990. "Linguistic transcoding or Cultural Transfer? A Critique of Translation Theory in Germany." In *Translation, History and Culture,* Susan Bassnett & André Lefevere (eds), 79–86. London: Pinter.

Snell-Hornby, Mary. 2006. *The Turns of Translation Studies. New paradigms or shifting viewpoints?* Benjamins Translation Library 66. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Snell-Hornby, Mary. 2009. "What's in a turn? On fits, starts and writhings in recent Translation Studies." In *The Translational Turn*, Doris Bachmann-Medick (ed.). Special issue of *Translation Studies* 2 (1): 41–51.

Wolf, Michaela & Alexandra Fukari (eds). 2007. *Constructing a Sociology of Translation.* Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.