

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from *Handbook of Translation Studies. Volume 4.*

Edited by Yves Gambier and Luc van Doorslaer.

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Translational turn

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1. The turn to “translation” – a “translational turn”?

The globalization of society demands increased attention to processes of mediation and transfer* – between cultures, religions, social groups – in terms of the interactions that make up cultural encounters. Within such scenarios, which demand coping with shifts between different and often even conflicting contexts, translation* is a central concern. Translation constitutes an essential medium for global relations of exchange and transformation and is a practice in and by which cultural differences, power imbalances and scopes for action are revealed and enacted.

Broadening and expanding the category of translation is important for the emergence of a ‘translational turn’ in the Humanities and Social Sciences. An essential precondition for this development has been the ‘cultural turn’ within Translation Studies* itself, which has been going on since the 1980s (cf. Susan Bassnett, Lawrence Venuti, Michael Cronin et al. see *The turns of Translation Studies**). Translation is no longer considered to be a mere linguistic or textual practice but rather a broad-based cultural and social activity. Accordingly, translation’s purview has opened to questions of cultural translation and the frictions and complexities of cultural life-worlds themselves. Nearly two decades ago, Susan Bassnett started to designate translation as a main category within Cultural Studies by speaking of a “translation turn in cultural studies” (Bassnett 1998; Snell-Hornby 2006: 164–69). More recently, voices from outside the discipline of Translation Studies have joined this debate. This has sharpened and extended the translational perspective theoretically and systematically: the formation of a broader ‘translational turn’ in various disciplines of the Humanities and Social Sciences is well on its way (Bassnett 2012; Bachmann-Medick 2009).

This ‘translational turn’ can be seen as part of a wider cross-disciplinary chain of ‘cultural turns’ that have shaped, and are shaping, current research in the Humanities and Social Sciences: the interpretive turn, performative turn, iconic turn, postcolonial turn, spatial turn, etc. (Bachmann-Medick 2010). A general methodological and conceptual condition applies to the ‘translational turn’, as well as all other ‘turns’: only when a conceptual leap has been made, when ‘translation’ is no longer restricted to a particular field or object of investigation and the term has moved as a

methodologically reflected analytical category across disciplines can we really speak of a ‘translational turn’.

The formation of this ‘translational turn’ should not be confused with another ‘translational turn’, which has been discussed in medicine to indicate the transfer of scientific insights in medical research to new forms of clinical therapy and pharmaceutical products (Mittra & Milne 2013). The ‘translational turn’ in the Humanities and Social Sciences entails a broader, cross-disciplinary adoption of translation as an analytical category with a new emphasis on the often challenging shifts between different (cultural) levels and contexts, whether in intercultural transfers or in interdisciplinary activities. In these processes, the familiar categories of text-related translation, closely linked to notions of the original, equivalence or faithfulness, are increasingly supplemented by new categories such as cultural representation or social addressing, transformation, alterity, displacement, discontinuity, cultural difference, conflict and power. These terms reveal the complex conditions and elements of overlapping, passage, transmission and transformation that are at work in processes of translation.

In the sense of a complex analytical model, translation can, firstly, be productive in reworking views within academic research practices. It is, for example, helpful to consider inter- or transdisciplinarity as a problem of translation. In contrast to the ‘smoother’ category of interdisciplinarity^{***}, the translation category has the advantage of explicitly addressing the differences and tensions between disciplines and schools of thought. Increased attention to such conflicting contact zones could be particularly rewarding in terms of understanding the transformation of scientific concepts through their translation into and reformulation within other contexts and conceptual systems. A fascinating example of this is the current debate between the Neurosciences and Humanities over ‘free will’.

Secondly, translation offers a new methodological and epistemological approach. It can help various disciplines (History, Sociology, Comparative Literature, Political Science, etc.) to develop a ‘translational’ approach that investigates the management of differences, mediations between different contexts, third spaces between people, cultures and contexts, connections and associations. The ‘translational turn’ has, in fact, provoked a general translational mode of thinking, in the sense of ‘border thinking’ and ‘in-between thinking’.

Thirdly, translation can be fruitful for reinterpreting situations of global cultural encounter, difference and conflict. The ‘translational turn’, conceived in this way, does not approach translation as a harmonious ideal that builds bridges between cultures or as a hermeneutic model of cultural understanding. Rather, it is a methodologically operative approach (in research as well as cultural practice itself) for negotiating differences, re-evaluating misunderstanding and exposing power asymmetries.

2. Concretizing an expanded translation category

With this wider perspective, the concept of translation risks being diluted into a mere metaphor. It is, therefore, important to delineate the concept more precisely, by almost microscopically dissecting it into its components (transfer, mediation, transmission, metaphor, the linguistic dimension, transformation) and breaking up larger complexes like cultural transfer, cultural dialogue and cultural comparison into smaller units of communication and interaction – including concrete translational activities performed by agents. There is still untapped potential in ideas such as those expressed in Susan Bassnett's early call for approaching translation theory as a general theory of transactions that focusses specifically on translators as cultural brokers:

Today the movement of peoples around the globe can be seen to mirror the very process of translation itself, for translation is not just the transfer of texts from one language into another, it is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator. (Bassnett 2002: 5–6)

2.1 Translation as self-translation and transformation

Revaluation of the mediating activities and negotiations practised by translators opens the door for analyzing concrete experiences, actions and constraints that translation and self-translation* impose on subjects in the framework of “translation as a social action” (Fuchs 2009). The sociologist Martin Fuchs, for example, shows how Indian untouchables, or Dalits, try to translate their specific concerns into a universalist, Buddhist idiom to find a point of contact with other social contexts and, thus, gain recognition. When translational actions need to capture universalist “third idioms” (such as Buddhism) as reference points, the situation is evidently multipolar. Translation, here, is more than just a bipolar bridge or one-way transfer process; instead, it entails complex relationships of reciprocity and mutual transformation. This is one of the challenging insights that the ‘translational turn’ brings to the fore.

The ground for this far-reaching notion of translation as transformation was prepared by the postcolonial debate (see also Post-colonial literatures and translation*). Postcolonial Studies has largely focused on transforming Europe's understanding of itself as an ‘original’, critically re-mapping and reorienting previously dominant notions of centre and periphery, breaking open fixed identities and attacking the principle of binarism in favour of hybrid mixing (see also Eurocentrism***). Yet, the postcolonial debates' attention to patterns of power in all kinds of translational relations has also established terms for considering assumed mutual translations and transformations as conflicting processes.

2.2 Culture as translation

Far-reaching approaches to translation as transformation have created demand for a translational reconceptualization of the notion of culture itself: culture as translation (see Cultural approaches** and Cultural translation***). Cultures are no longer conceived of as unified givens that can be transferred and translated; they are constituted of and constantly transformed through multifarious overlaps, transferences and histories of entanglement within the uneven power relations of world society. Homi Bhabha has pointed out a task for transnational cultural studies still awaiting further elaboration: “Any transnational cultural study must ‘translate’, each time locally and specifically, what decentres and subverts this transnational globality” (Bhabha 1994:241). Countering tendencies to standardize, affirm identities and essentialize, a translation perspective can bring specific formations of difference to light, from heterogeneous discursive spaces between and within societies and internal counter-discourses through to discursive forms of resistance.

A translational approach like this might begin with the confrontation of concrete issues and work its way through the historical, social and political conditions that would enable cross-cultural translation. It would encourage us to spell out not only the meaning of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural studies’ but also ‘globalization*’ in a translational sense. Michael Cronin’s “globalization as translation” (Cronin 2003:34) refers to the decentering of global processes and to an agent-oriented view of globalization (see also Papastergiadis 2011). But the study of global translation processes also requires careful reflection of historical dimensions, calling for a reinterpretation of the transition of non-European nations (such as India and China) to capitalism and their distinctive modernities – no longer viewed as the results of linear processes of universalization but as the results of historical, translational ruptures.

2.3 Cross-disciplinary approaches to a “translational turn”

There is potential within various disciplines for further concretisation of translation as an analytical category. In Sociology, for example, integration processes can be based on “relations of translation” (Renn 2006), and migration*** can be reinterpreted in terms of translational action (see the debate on translation and migration in *Translation Studies* 5 (3) 2012; 6 (1) 2013 ; 6 (3) 2013). In Comparative Literature, political contexts have been considered from the vantage point of “translation zones****” (Apter 2006:5): investigations of language wars, linguistic creolization and multilingual situations aim to understand how, for example, “philology is linked to globalization, to Guantánamo Bay, to war and peace, to the Internet” (ibid. 11). Scholars of History have also recently made prominent efforts to further elaborate the ‘translational turn’ (Lässig 2012) by using translation as a methodological tool for illuminating micro-processes of historical transformation: concrete steps, interactions, actors and cultural brokers in the

processes of colonialism and decolonization, missionary activities, religious conversion and concept transfers. Beyond this, historians are increasingly interested in creative reinterpretations of basic political concepts like liberty, democracy and human rights (Tsing 1997; Bachmann-Medick 2012, 2013), which challenge and replace historical and political terms of those proposed by the “former” west (see Chakrabarty 2000).

3. Global and epistemological dimensions of a “translational turn”

Translation as an analytical category explicitly counters holistic tendencies inherent in general and synthesizing terms like culture, identity, tradition, society and religion. These terms can be disassembled when examined in a translational manner, undergoing a detailed historicization that rethinks colonial ruptures and displacements with respect to specific translational stages and processes. A path has, at least, been cleared for new methodological approaches to the ‘interstitial spaces’ so celebrated by the humanities by examining them as ‘translational spaces’ in which relationships, situations, ‘identities’ and interactions are shaped through concrete procedures of cultural translation. Geographically related categories between Translation Studies and Urban Studies emerge that deal with urban contact zones, third spaces, language communities and many-language migrants (see Simon 2012).

Translational spaces reach their greatest interpretive potential in an epistemological and analytical sense: by cross-cutting binary pairs and breaking open formulaic clusters. For example, a translational view of ‘interculturality’ makes the concept’s articulation of ‘in-betweenness’ plausible, shedding new light on easily forgotten issues like communicative power asymmetries, dispositions for mediating, misunderstanding or resistance, and the importance of (finding common) reference points. This kind of a translational approach makes complexity more transparent and easier to handle (even at the risk of, yet again, being seen as a European or western strategy).

3.1 From universalization to cross-categorical translation

Will the concept of translation succeed in transforming universalizing European theories, concepts and categories? It is becoming ever more dubious to assert a process of global communication that is grounded in universalizing assumptions that remain firmly in western hands. The assumption of global distribution on the basis of universalizing transfer is, at least, no longer uncontested. It is beginning to be filtered through global, reciprocal translation processes. This move is enhanced, above all, by studies that try to identify points of mutuality in translation processes, like the effort to find shared “third idioms” (with reference points like religion, as discussed by Fuchs 2009, or human rights, see Tsing 1997). Such approaches must respond to calls for

a reconceptualization of translation from outside of Europe – which are, at present, especially strong within Asia. Non-western conceptions of translation are being formulated as critiques of Eurocentrism, which colours notions of reciprocal translation and theoretical exchange (see Ning & Yifeng 2005).

As a critique of an all-too-easily-assumed transnational ‘translational turn’, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work shows how closely epistemological and global difficulties interlock with issues of cultural translation and translation policy. His book *Provincializing Europe* proposes that we consider translation not only “cross-culturally” but also “cross-categorically” (Chakrabarty 2000:83), thereby explicitly challenging Eurocentric, universalizing points of comparative reference. He demands opening the door to non-European categories of investigation. It must, for example, be possible to translate the Hindi term *pani* into the English term ‘water’ without having to pass through the pre-given category in the western knowledge system, H₂O (ibid.). For Chakrabarty, only a comparison that does not hastily resort to general terms of mediation nor leave the *tertium comparationis* unreflected can create a shared plane of mutual cultural translation.

Chakrabarty shows how “cross-categorical translation” demands a historicized and contextualized approach that moves beyond universalizing investigative categories such as democracy, human dignity and equality. Because there are no homogeneous spaces of reference in the global sphere, it is essential to attend carefully to culturally specific settings, conditions, deep structures and translational procedures, including those in our own research. With which concepts are we working? To what extent can we still consider research categories, like modernization, development, capitalism, labour, feminism and so on, to be universally valid? What kinds of translation processes are necessary for opening up such analytical terms transculturally and finding their functional equivalents for them in the spheres of action and conceptual systems of non-European societies?

3.2 Humanities as “translation studies”

Before the term “cross-cultural translation” can be used, reflection on the problem of “cross-categorical translation” is necessary. In doing so, a further dimension of the ‘translational turn’ becomes visible: the possibility – or rather, necessity – of translating between different, local knowledge cultures beyond a still-dominant European horizon.

This critical use of the translation category can harness its characteristic self-reflexivity and be used to consider the Humanities themselves as globally open forms of ‘translation studies’. This draws attention to the internal structure of knowledge acquisition: pluralized relations and phenomena arise precisely out of the disruption of concepts of wholeness and unity by indicating the multiple strata – and

contradictions – that each translation process inevitably accretes. A translational approach also helps us establish and analyze transcultural research that includes asymmetries and ruptures between different cultural knowledge systems. Contact zones, border spaces and overlaps are explored as formative spaces of translation.

Seen in this light, the ‘translational turn’ recognizes translation as far more than a process of successful mediation. It casts new light on the potentially constructive role of misunderstanding and “untranslatability” (Apter 2013) in securing (cultural) distinctions and singularities, working against the tendency to swallow and incorporate them into a process of globalized translation. The ‘translational turn’, thus, explores and extends its own limits.

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