

An Interview with Mary Snell-Hornby

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Mary Snell-Hornby (hereafter **MSH**) is an eminent scholar of Translation Studies and a founding member of the European Society for Translation Studies (EST) and its first President. She has been a Professor of Translation Studies at the University of Vienna and an Honorary Professor of the University of Warwick (UK). She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of the University of Tampere (Finland) for her contribution to the discipline of Translation Studies. Geethakumary V. (hereafter **VGK**), an assistant editor of *Translation Today*, interviews Mary Snell-Hornby.

VGK: You have been associated with the Rewriting-Culture School of Translation Studies which was launched in the 1980s. Looking back thirty years, how do you assess the impact of the School on Translation Studies?

MSH: In those days translation was seen simply either as part of Comparative Literature (literary translation) or as part of linguistics (an exercise based prescriptively on equivalence with items in the source language), and so there was no discipline of Translation Studies, let alone different schools. This changed in the early 1980s, when two different groups of scholars, quite independently of each other, developed theories concentrating, not on the source text, but on the reception and purpose of the translation in the target culture. One of these groups, on the initiative of Hans J. Vermeer, developed the “skopos theory” (from the Greek word *skopos*, meaning “aim” or “purpose”), which applied to all types of translation and interpreting as an independent field of study, and it included the training of future professionals. It views translation, not simply as linguistic recoding, but as a cultural transfer. This

Geethakumary V.

was the group I was most closely associated with, and from today's viewpoint I can say that it helped lay the foundation for the discipline of Translation Studies we know today.

VGK: How far has the European Society for Translation Studies (EST) succeeded in fulfilling its objectives as laid down in its constitution?

MSH: The objectives of the European Society for Translation Studies (founded in September 1992) defined four main objectives in its constitution: (1) to foster research in translation and interpreting, (2) to promote further education for teachers of translation and interpreting, (3) to offer advice on the training of translators and interpreters and (4) to facilitate contacts between the profession and the academic training institutes. I think the first three objectives have been largely fulfilled: today EST has several hundred members from 46 countries, has a regular newsletter, organizes a major Congress every three years, along with numerous smaller conferences and workshops, it finances several awards, and it offers weekly information on the many events in the discipline taking place all over the world. The title "European" does not mean that membership and events are limited to Europe: In 1992, when scholarly institutions were largely local, regional or national, the epithet "European" signaled "supranational". The next major EST congress, by the way, will take place in 2019 in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

The fourth objective is more problematic: to this day the translation profession – and this includes interpreters, with the exception of conference interpreters – has still a low status in society, and training mainly goes unnoticed, if it takes place at all. This is however not only the fault of EST, but is also due to the translators themselves and their respective associations along with the training institutes, which have not succeeded in

promoting and gaining public recognition for the skill and expertise necessary for good professional translating and interpreting.

VGK: Along with Andre Lefevere, Susan Bassnett and others you were connected with the early practitioners of the Systems Approach to Translation Studies. This approach seems to have been launched by polysystemists like Itamar Evan Zohar in the late 70s of the last century and given more concrete foundations by translation scholars like Andre Lefevere in the mid-80s. Do you think it is still effective in Translation Studies? Are there ways in which it can be ‘modified’ or ‘refined’?

MSH: Andre Lefevere was a prominent figure in the second group of scholars I mentioned above, which is what you describe as the “Rewriting-Culture school”: this approach, at least here in Europe, is mainly known as Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) and is centred round literary translation. That group of scholars supported the polysystem theory, which was indeed launched by Itamar Evan-Zohar; it was developed for Translation Studies by Gideon Toury, who remained a leading figure in the discipline up to his death in 2016. Susan Bassnett was also a prominent member of this circle, and of course I was closely associated with her when I was Honorary Professor in Warwick. This school of thought is indeed still influential in the discipline. Of course I could think of various points of modification and refinement – but after thirty years that would be extremely problematic and would go far beyond the scope of this interview.

VGK: In your first book *Translation Studies. An Integrated Approach*, apart from positioning Translation Studies as a discipline, you largely concentrated on the process, rather than the product of translation, sometimes with micro-level

Geethakumary V.

illustrations. Although such in-depth linguistic/cultural analysis is highly valuable for practicing translators, as one finds in the works of Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark and others, it operates on the borderline between description and prescription! How significant is it in contemporary Translation Studies?

MSH: This book was written during the 1980s, when I worked in the English Department of the University of Zurich, and the “integrated approach” was intended to combine the then conflicting worlds of linguistics and literary studies. The book should be seen as a product of its time, although it still sells well (especially in Asian countries!). Hence the focus was on the process of translation (I was then teaching German-English translation to Swiss students of English) along with the micro-level illustrations, which were examples taken from my classes. You find a similar approach in the work of Nida (himself a translator) and Newmark (a teacher of translation). The idea of including a descriptive element was then a novelty, particularly in university language departments, which by nature had a prescriptive approach. I am actually rather skeptical about whether this book is still significant for contemporary Translation Studies and would rather people concentrated on the second book *The Turns of Translation Studies* (cf. my Preface to this, p. ix!).

VGK: Many theorists argue that the ‘top-down approach’ suggested by you for ‘textual analysis’ is more valid theoretically, but for those who are not trained linguists it can be difficult to follow. Please comment.

MSH: I have had no evidence that this analytical approach is difficult to follow. It provides another perspective of the translational task in hand. Instead of viewing a text as a sequence of lexical items, it takes the communicative function

and the broader sociocultural background as its starting point and sees the other items as dependent on this – which needs no training in linguistics.

VGK: In your later book *The Turns of Translation Studies* you briefly discussed the U-turn in Translation Studies which is marked by a return to Linguistics. How does this actually work out? Does it seriously undermine the work done by ‘culturists’ in the last three decades or more in the West?

MSH: Here again this discussion must be seen in the context of the time when it was written (2005, published 2006) and the period to which it refers (the first few years of this century). What is meant is the re-introduction of topics such as the age-old debate on the translation unit and linguistic equivalence (which was the central issue from the 1960s to the early 1980s), the focus on computer corpora (actually taken over from lexicography projects in the 1980s, particularly the COBUILD project in Birmingham) and the theme of “translation universals”, a favourite concept of Transformational Generative Grammar, which famously dominated the 1960s. Of course it is legitimate to revive any traditionally popular issue and discuss it further, but in such cases I saw no progress made in the Translation Studies debate and agree with Hans Vermeer that it rather showed the pendulum swinging back to traditional views. But I don’t think that it did anything to undermine the work done by the “culturists”, which on the contrary moved on to create a much broader conception of the term “translation” (see 7 below).

VGK: Lawrence Venuti noted that only 4 percent of the total volume of translations in the world is basically literary in nature. Yet Translation Studies has been, and still is, largely literature-centric. This is despite the fact that aesthetics and ideology are equally at work in non-literary translations and

the key issues in Translation Studies are equally applicable to them. Although some work on audiovisual translation and translation in the media, especially on scientific and technical translation and translation of advertisements have tried to correct the imbalance, literary translation studies still dominate the discipline. Do you foresee a drastic change in the near future?

MSH: The observation is quite correct that literary translation only forms a small percentage of the total volume of translations in the world. However, only one branch of Translation Studies is concerned with literary texts, and that is because of its century-old historical tradition – and the unbroken dominance of Literary Studies in academe. However, there is meanwhile a vast amount of work done in many other areas such as legal translation, translation for international organizations, translation technology and terminology, machine-aided translation etc. etc., not to mention Interpreting Studies, which you do not include in your questions. And I would not agree (and neither, I think, would the translators involved!) that aesthetics is very prominent in much of this material – in how far ideology is involved depends on the text and the translation concerned. Audiovisual translation has branched out on its own to form an exciting new field with its own plethora of specialized literature, but here again it depends on the material concerned whether one would recognize any literary value (this may be the case in various film-scripts for dubbing). Subtitlers of my acquaintance – and those who write academic papers in the field – rather analyze the technical and cultural difficulties involved, and most of the language of TV soaps etc. is of nil literary significance. Advertising (and with it work on localization) is another interesting field in itself – again with plenty of specialized literature. In my Institute, which was founded for the training of non-literary translators,

literary translation was for many years barely existent: now that the Institute has developed into a Centre for Translation (and Interpreting) Studies, literary translation forms a part, but by no means a dominant one, of the teaching programme and research. So such a dominance depends on whether scholars are working in literary studies (including translation), which seems to be the basis of your interview questions, or “T&I” (Translation and Interpreting Studies) as an essentially interdisciplinary field of studies. And here a wide gap still exists.

VGK: Many translation scholars of your generation, especially those who blazed into prominence during the 1980s, the heyday of the “Rewriting-Culture” school of Translation Studies, have contributed significantly to Adaptation Studies, the discipline that branched off from Translation Studies during the first decade of the new millennium. John Milton’s essay “Translation Studies and Adaptation Studies” published in 2006 seems to have formally launched the discipline. The emergence of Adaptation Studies represents a greater paradigm shift than the emergence of the “Rewriting-Culture” school of Translation Studies. It appears to have provoked a new look at issues like originality, equivalence and intertextuality. By positioning translation as only one among the many forms of adaptation (taking off from Lefevere’s positioning of translation as one among the many forms of rewriting) and by erasing the dividing line between writing and rewriting it seems to have accomplished a unification of cultural productions, much like the still elusive unification of forces in Physics. What is your take on the future of Adaptation Studies?

MSH: As you point out, what has been developed as Adaptation Studies branched off from Translation Studies in the early years of this century – but in fact it only takes up

much of what had long since been accepted as part of Translation Studies. In the 1980s the skopos theorists Hans Vermeer and Katharina Reiss identified five broad translation types: interlinear translation, grammar translation, documentary (or “scholarly”) translation, communicative (or “instrumental”) translation and adapting (or “modifying”) translation, as with multimedial (or audiovisual) translation (as essentially interdisciplinary areas) or when news reports are used by press agencies (see *The Turns of Translation Studies*, p. 53). This broadens the entire concept of translation to include areas such as stage and opera translations, and film versions of literary works. In this definition adaptation is rather part of translation than the other way round, and the issues of originality, equivalence and intertextuality were debated in Translation Studies long before 2006. It depends of course on the definition of translation, which in the English-speaking debate has been notoriously narrow, and it is significant that much of the work in Adaptation Studies seems to be involved with British and American material, whereas the five translation types quoted above go back to European theorists. Meanwhile however, the broader definition of translation has been widely accepted (see the *History of Modern Translation Knowledge*, ed. Yves Gambier and Lieven D’huylst, planned to appear later this year). The future of Adaptation Studies will of course depend on the scholars in the field, but at present I tend to see it limited to literary work (as with film adaptations of novels). Translation Studies as we see it today covers an infinitely broader field, including special language and machine-aided translation, but especially Interpreting Studies, which in recent years has really branched off as a separate field to include hitherto neglected areas such as dialogue interpreting, courtroom interpreting and other areas of public service communication.

VGK: How will you respond to the view that translation is a political activity where politics operates at the level of selection of a text for translation, the process of translation, with the nature of existence of a translated text and its reception among others?

MSH: I fully agree, and of course this approach is not new either. However, this is another completely different (and sensitive) field from the rest of the discussions above, even where “only” literary translation is involved, but far more so in most other areas of the discipline, and it would go far beyond the scope of this interview to discuss the problems and give the issues involved the attention they deserve.
