

**Translation and Interdisciplinarity: an Interview with
Susan Bassnett**

Following on from previous articles on adaptation and translation, we wanted to find out from Susan Bassnett, one of the leading figures in Translation Studies, what her opinions were of the relationship between Translation Studies and other disciplines, including Adaptation Studies and American Studies:

Q: *Your excellent pieces on the growth of Translation Studies in the Seventies and Eighties give a fascinating insight into how the discipline originated and developed (Bassnett, "Translation Studies" 15-25). As an interdisciplinary mode of working, it's fascinating to find out what you think about the ways in which the discipline impacted (or did not impact) on existing humanities curricula within institutions. I'd like to begin by asking two questions: when you wrote the first edition of the **Translation Studies** book, do you think that the discipline was identified with a particularly "European" form of thinking, as opposed to an "Anglocentric" form? Most of the authorities you worked with came from Europe, rather than the United Kingdom; do you think that was significant? And, following on from that, do you think that Translation Studies had any impact on the ways in which literature departments - especially those within the UK - actually looked at texts?*

SB: You are right: early Translation Studies was NOT English at all. Indeed, during the late 1970s and 1980s anyone with an interest in translation, literary theory more generally, gender theory, or postcolonialism was reading outside the Anglophone world and there was considerable resistance from more traditional English departments.¹ The problem was, I think that within English Studies there were barriers erected between literary scholarship and linguistics, and between any kind of language

1 In light of Bassnett's remark (*Translation Studies*, ch.1) that only a small percentage of books published in English were translations (less than 4% of the total, compared to 25% in Italy in 1995), we ought not to be surprised that literature departments were so resistant.

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study and literature, so Translation Studies (a basically interdisciplinary form of learning) was regarded with suspicion. Also don't forget the huge influence of the British critic F. R. Leavis and the I. A. Richards-inspired approach to practical criticism, both which viewed literary theory as a "foreign" import. Antony Easthope wrote brilliantly about this dichotomy (Easthope).

To some extent the problem is still there, as most programs in Translation Studies in the United Kingdom are linked to modern languages rather than to English departments. Comparative Literature, American and world Literatures are still only taught here and there and now there is the added problem of the dominance of English as a global language. I sometimes think that one of the reasons for the success of postcolonial courses is that it enables texts to be read that are not traditionally English, while avoiding the issue of reading in translation. And by talking about race and colonialism, the question of inter- and cross-cultural exchange and the issues that emerge the moment we think about what translation involves can also be sidestepped.

Q: *Which means to a large extent that Translation Studies – understood in the broadest sense as the study of the process of cultural as well as linguistic transfer – can be marginalized within mainstream curricula? Yet it seems evident that many postcolonial scholars have taken to writing about “translation,” (I put the term deliberately in quotes) as well as including a translation element in many of their courses. I recently came across an MA at the University of Kent, for instance, that relates “translation” – their term – to theories of contemporary culture and narrative practice, without involving any Translation Studies theory work at all (“Postcolonial Studies.”) Do you think this is symptomatic of a wider movement in which postcolonial scholars are trying to bring “translation” into the agenda without being interested in translation studies, so to speak?*

SB: Your last sentence sums it up in one. They are interested in translation understood as Homi Bhabha expresses it, as cultural migration (308), which is why Harish Trivedi gets so cross and complains that nowadays monolinguals have appropriated the terminology of translation for their own purposes, to talk about the condition of movement across cultures, rather than about linguistic journeys (Trivedi). What I am endeavoring to do is to find a way of bringing those two apparently

incompatible positions closer together. I have just written a preface for a collection of essays on media and translation (Bassnett, "Preface"), a collection that is very broad in its remit and brings together people who see themselves as Translation Studies scholars and others from other fields. I think this kind of enterprise is very positive, because it means that people have to "translate" their in-house language for representatives of other disciplines. Years ago, in the Warwick British Cultural Studies seminars this is what I was aiming to do: to get people from different starting points to share their ideas and methodologies, with the objective of some kind of cross-fertilization.² I still believe in this as an approach, though I have to admit that it only works sometimes.

Q: *I remember those seminars, which brought people together from different disciplines and different cultures into dialogue with one another. Your reference to cultural studies leads me on to another issue: during the Seventies and Eighties there was talk of a new movement in literary and cultural studies, one that would be genuinely interdisciplinary in the sense of combining literary, sociological and anthropological studies, as well as other disciplines. Through the work of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies and the theoretical interventions of Raymond Williams,³ cultural studies always prided itself on its interdisciplinarity, or (better defined) its anti-disciplinarity. Similarly American Studies enjoyed a period of growth in the Seventies and early Eighties, most notably at my old institution (Sussex University).⁴ Do you think these two disciplines were regarded as more academically 'legitimate' in their approach to interdisciplinary study, as compared to Translation Studies?*

SB: Cultural Studies had a clear political agenda: to restate the importance of working-class traditions (as in the work of E. P. Thompson); to reconsider oral traditions that had clearly had an impact on English literature as a whole (for example Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning,

2 Six seminars were organized by the University of Warwick in association with the British Council. The last of these, "Looking Into England," concentrated on notions of Englishness from interdisciplinary perspectives. A report on this conference appeared in *British Studies Now* 13 (Summer 2000): 3-30. An online copy of the journal can be accessed at *Citeseer*, Pennsylvania State University (2013), Web. 5 Feb. 2014.

3 For example, in seminal works such as *Culture and Society* (1958).

4 See, "University of Sussex: School of History, Art History and Philosophy: American Studies." Web. 5 Feb. 2014.

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Dickens, etc.); and later with Stuart Hall to focus on race as well. So class, race, gender issues dominated Cultural Studies thinking, which is why a) eventually even the pioneering Birmingham Centre moved into Sociology before it died,⁵ away from literature and b) which is also why there was so little interest in other cultures which required a different kind of knowledge and understanding. I believe that legacy lives on in the emphasis on postcolonial studies without a specific translation studies element. Back in 1996 in the book I co-wrote with André Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures*, there is a chapter calling for “The Translation turn in cultural studies” (Bassnett and Lefevere). That has never happened!

Q: *What about cultural materialism? Do you think anyone working in that area took notice of Translation Studies?*

SB: Cultural materialism was a reaction against the wooly decontextualized study of texts, particularly Shakespeare and the Renaissance in general.⁶ I found people like Stephen Greenblatt really useful, and the approach was very much in line with how translation people like Even-Zohar and Lefevere were moving. But as we know, English departments in Britain especially tended to be very inward looking, and nobody to my knowledge made the direct connection between cultural materialist research and Translation Studies research. Clearly people like myself, Edwin Gentzler, Michael Cronin, Sherry Simon, and Lawrence Venuti have all been influenced to some degree by cultural materialist thinking, but I don't see evidence of cultural materialist scholarship taking much notice of Translation Studies.

Q: *Despite the success of Translation Studies (and to a much lesser extent, Adaptation Studies) in establishing themselves as autonomous disciplines, they still seem to be sidelined somewhat by those who would impose a specific ideological agenda. Do you think this is a form of conscious marginalization?*

5 The Centre was established in 1964 by Richard Hoggart, and closed in 2002.

6 Cultural materialists analyzed the processes by which hegemonic forces in society appropriate canonical texts, such as Shakespeare and Austen, and utilize them in an attempt to validate or inscribe certain values. Books such as *Political Shakespeare*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (1985) have had considerable influence in the development of this movement.

SB: I think that Cultural Studies was so radical in its time that early practitioners were totally focused on bringing discussions about class, race and then gender into the limelight. Only gradually did the field start to lose its cutting edge and become predictable, but by then (as always happens) second and third generations who were not cutting-edge or radical wanted to be seen as such. Most of the people working in Cultural Studies had no linguistic skills and no interest in starting to learn about other cultures, so research in translation passed them by completely. I do think there is a subconscious cultural imperialism here that assumes the English-speaking world is better than anything else.

Q: *This is a fascinating analysis, illustrating the difficulties many interdisciplinary subjects experience, especially when they are introduced into academic cultures that regard them with suspicion . . .*

SB: This process of introducing new material can cause some resentment as well. I was hearing recently of a totally monolingual British Cultural Studies person giving lectures in China, and the (multilingual) Scandinavian fellow keynote speaker who was also a Cultural Studies specialist told me she had engaged him in a debate about language and culture that he seemed not to understand. She works in cultural studies, but also has fluent Mandarin, German, English, French and Danish, and couldn't see why her colleague was, as she put it, "exporting some colonial brand of cultural study."

Q: *Let me be a little provocative for a moment. Some Translation Studies scholars have been particularly skeptical of Adaptation Studies, treating as an upstart discipline that is in a sense encroaching on their territory. Do you agree with that?*

SB: Not necessarily. But I do think that Adaptation Studies is seen in some quarters as not having engaged sufficiently with language issues, much as Cultural Studies has also remained monolingual. So the language question comes in very strongly with Adaptation Studies as well, given its proximity in some aspects to fields such as film studies, for example.

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Q: *Your point about the monolingual nature of Adaptation Studies is a good one; I think what I've discovered more than anything else while working in a non-English speaking context is just how polysemic the meanings of "adaptation" and "translation" can be. I believe that too many adaptation scholars have a fixed (some might say colonialist) idea of what those terms signify, which they try to export worldwide.*

SB: Translation Studies has now established itself in academia and has chairs, degree programs, and institutional status as well as journals and conferences which Adaptation Studies has yet to do. On the other hand Translation Studies has split into all kinds of different areas, some more literary, some linguistic, some technological, some sociological, some philosophical. Do you think that the same will happen to Adaptation Studies? If so, can one discern the fault lines already?

Q: *In the sense that 'adaptation' can be understood in different contexts differently, the answer is definitely yes. More importantly, I think that 'adaptation' can have discipline-specific meanings; to "adapt" in the psychological sense is very different from the process of adapting texts, even if the two can be related.*

SB: Interesting. Possibly the best way for Translation and Adaptation Studies to negotiate with one another would be through transdisciplinary thinking. The same is happening in the sciences, and I think this is because the subject divisions established in the nineteenth century were too rigid and have started to disintegrate as people want to move across boundaries and explore the world differently.

Q: *When you were involved in the British Studies project some years back, didn't you feel that the question of transdisciplinarity was inadequately addressed, especially by members of the British Council, or by colleagues sent out to various territories from the United Kingdom?⁷ Didn't you think at the time that "British Studies," as with any other form of country studies such as American Studies, needed to be approached from a wider angle, rather than simply looking at it "interculturally," which was the buzz-word at that time? I think this is an important issue, relating to all forms of country study, including American Studies.*

7 See Laurence Raw, "Transcultural Literary Studies." *The Human* 1 (July 2013): 36-46. Web. 5 Feb. 2014.

SB: My take on British Studies, (like Martin Montgomery and a few others) was to try and work with transnational perceptions, hence the importance of travel writing about Britain or by British writers reporting back, as it were, on what they saw.⁸ However I think that the project was taken over by people who were totally monolingual, and had set ideas of what country studies projects should be.

Q: *Let me move on a little bit. In a recent issue of the **Times Literary Supplement**, critics have taken translators to task for their perceived lack of respect for the “original” or the source text.⁹ Does this suggest that Translation Studies, like Adaptation Studies, has had no real impact on popular conceptions of what ‘translation’ or ‘adaptation’ might be?*

SB: I despair of the TLS which takes such a reactionary stance vis-à-vis translation. I just don’t bother to read any of their discussions, because the same tired old discourse is trotted out as though there had been no new theorizing in the last 50 years.

Q: *I would agree with that. I’ve recently encountered a book on George Orwell by Robert Colls – who participated at one of the University of Warwick British Studies seminars, on Englishness in 1999 – and it seems as if his definition of that so-called national (or should it be cultural) category is still predicated on the idea of “common sense”: all readers understand what it is to be “English” and therefore it does not need to be problematized.*

SB: I find that some very exciting thinking about translation is coming from people who might not necessarily define themselves necessarily as Translation Studies scholars, from classicists, comparative literature, world literature, or globalization studies. And sometimes when I have said this sort of thing at Translation Studies events, I have been accused of not giving “proper” prominence to translation. But I do think there are opportunities for more transdisciplinary ways of thinking, involving scholars from disciplines other than translation.

8 See Bassnett, “Travel Writing Within British Studies.” *Studies in Travel Writing* 3.1 (1999): 1-16.

9 Margaret Jull Costa, “Through a Glass Darkly.” *TLS*, 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 5 Feb. 2014.

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Q: *One of the things I find so refreshing about working in comparative studies (including comparative American Studies) is a willingness not to accept definitions as given, but to try and deconstruct – or should that be reconstruct – them over space, time and cultures.*

SB: Exactly. As I said in my *Target* essay quoted earlier, it is *fatal* to become respectable if you have started out questioning and challenging orthodoxies.

Q: *What kind of things do you think need to happen so as to promote greater dialogue and risk-taking amongst academics from different disciplines? How can we encourage colleagues to set aside their preconceptions - often monolingual in orientation - and lay themselves open to new theoretical and/or ideological ways of thinking. What kind of things can we do that we've not done before?*

SB: Those questions are really difficult to answer, because part of the problem is the shift in the university world towards more regulation, in which international league tables have become so important and the constant assessing of research “quality” stifles innovation and forces younger colleagues to try and publish a) in English and b) in so-called “reputable” journals. I began my career publishing in minor journals, some of which only existed for a brief time and there was no pressure at all to seek out the “top” ones; indeed part of how I positioned myself was to avoid deliberately the established journals.

There are still some avenues, probably through the internet. I am an admirer of the literary translation journal *Asymptote* for example, though I criticized their choice of title when they first started out three years ago. Their focus is on translation worldwide, nonfictional and fictional, as well as publishing criticism, feature articles and visual material. I also admire Siri Nergaard’s transdisciplinary journal *Translation*, appearing in both print and online form since 2011, which makes genuine efforts to redefine what “translation” means in the contemporary world. I also think that conferences that bring together post-graduates from different disciplines are an excellent idea, and in such forums one can often hear new ideas starting to form.

But I don't know that there is anything that my generation can do now, except to encourage boldness. People who take risks have always been around; it's just that it is harder to take risks in today's academic environment that is so increasingly business-driven. Still, as I am in that environment until the end of 2016, for my sins, I shall have to carry on encouraging others and hope for the best.

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