Challenges after the Linguistic Turn

The last two decades in history and the social sciences have been marked by the advances of what is known as the linguistic, or the cultural, turn. Historians, sociologists and (maybe less so) political scientists have increasingly turned their attention to questions of language, identity, symbols and social constructions, leaving behind the quantifiable material explanations of the 1960s and 1970s. Although this turn can be traced back even to the mid-1960s with the works of Michel Foucault, both the scientific communities still devoted to 'traditional' approaches as well as those dedicated to studies of culture and language refer to the linguistic turn as a novelty. Indeed, many (mainly the practitioners themselves) see the linguistic turn as an oppositional, progressive method breaking new grounds in the face of hard resistance from the 'conservatives'. Even if the conflict between the two is very real in many institutions, the adjectives 'new' and 'traditional' are hardly appropriate after twenty years. Rather the present situation is one of competition between established schools and methods.

The idea of the seminar 'Beyond the Linguistic Turn' is first and foremost to get beyond the image of the linguistic turn as a ground-breaking new perspective and see it as an established school with the constraints and possibilities. As the possibilities and advantages have been thoroughly described elsewhere, the seminar will mainly focus on the questions of constraints. As any other scientific discipline, the linguistic turn in the social and humane sciences is mainly a restrictive praxis. It prescribes certain questions and answers and the way of getting from one to the other, while excluding alternatives. It could be argued that the linguistic turn has arrived at a state where the original insights to a large degree have been exhausted. It seems that the school show signs of entrenchment, which makes its inherent limits ever more obvious. By taking such tendencies of entrenchment and exhaustion up for discussion, we hope maintain or create a more dynamic and open view of the disciplines.

The position of language as one, or even the, constitutive element of the social has been a fundamental assumption of the linguistic turn. This idea exists in many forms, from the rather moderate view that language is our only medium of explanation and communication of an otherwise inaccessible reality, to the view that social reality itself works as a language, where meaning is produced by an underlying 'grammar'. Both views have difficulties explaining the interplay between language and its tangible reference, often leaving language as an arbitrary and independent system
of representation. *Reference*, understood as the connection between linguistic representation and the reality it represents, could be worth reconsidering as a way to loosen the constraints of a too linguistic view of the social fabric.

One of the characteristics of the linguistic turn has been the eagerness of its practitioners to legitimise the method. One could label this a 'primacy of epistemology', where the demonstration of the usefulness of the methodology overshadows the actual object of inquiry. Typically, the aim of such research is to demonstrate the construction of the social through language, and how a cultural/linguistic method can reveal this. Whereas this discussion certainly was ground-breaking in the 1970s and 1980s, constructivism has now - in more or less radical form - attained a near-hegemonic status in most disciplines. The positivist (or Marxist) assumptions, which were the original targets, have either disappeared or softened considerably during the discussions of the last two decades. Hence, the essentialism that is the main target of for example postcolonial or gender studies has long lost the position, where it could be identified as the main opponent. The methodological criterion of relevance seems to be outdated and now mostly functioning as a constraint.

Another constraint appears to be the very descriptive character of much language-oriented research. Especially discourse analysis has the tendency to track changes in discourses over time and establishing a chronology of change, but when it comes to actual explanation, the insistence on the primacy of language makes it difficult to reach a conclusion in the classic, hypothesis-testing-concluding sequence. Hence, there is a danger of finishing with a descriptive chronicle of discursive change. Tracking such changes certainly demonstrates the historical construction of the social and hence breaks essentialist assumptions. As few, however, would still argue for an essential, unchanging concept of ‘freedom’, ‘science’ or ‘sanity’, there is also here a tendency to fight battles that have already been won.

In the three examples above, two problems seem to repeat themselves. First the self-imposed limit of seeing language as a self-contained object of analysis, or even as the basis of the social. Second the image of the cultural studies/the linguistic turn as a new, methodological alternative in opposition to an, often imagined, essentialist/positivist ‘traditionalism’.

With these two problems as a possible point of departure, it could be interesting to consider ways to re-open the dynamic potential of the linguistic turn. While focusing on the problems of the linguistic turn, it is worth remembering how profoundly it has changed the social sciences and humanities. Although positivist approaches still play an important role especially within the social
sciences, these are more often than not connected to other fields of research. The challenges and novelties of the linguistic turn has opened fields of enquiry and scopes of methods that cannot be rolled back. There is no return to the common sense understanding of the social and the materialist explanations of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the linguistic turn has thus not been a complete victory, it has established it self as an alternative to be reckoned with, not the least because it posed new questions that had to be taken seriously. Perhaps indeed the recognition of this position as an alternative might be a way of rethinking the role of the linguistic turn.

One of the paradoxes of the term post-modernism (as another synonym for the linguistic turn) has often been the very modernist sense, in which it has been used. While claiming to go beyond the modernist idea of progression, it is at the same time claiming to be a step forward, discarding essentialism and positivism for a more adequate understanding of society and a more refined methodology. Instead, one could take the full step and see the present diversity of methodology as equal but different ways of solving problems, instead of competing paradigms. One could even talk of genres of description, like poetry or prose, which do not exclude each other, despite of different styles of representation.

In this way, the linguistic turn still poses a challenge to the social sciences and the humanities, but not the least to itself. This should be the point of departure for rethinking of the scientific discussions of the last 20 years.