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Introduction

One of the most influential theories on translation in the 20th century was Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem theory. This theory became influential because it attempted to view translations from a more comprehensive perspective, by locating them within the context of the literature of the receptor language. The theory was not originally propounded for translations, but was later used to understand the position of translations and their function. Influenced by Russian Formalism, Even-Zohar developed the polysystem theory in the early 1970s while trying to come up with a model for Hebrew literature.The work was originally published in French, and was published in 1978 in English as *Papers in Historical Poetics* . Gideon Toury, a younger scholar, expanded it further and came up with the theory of norms in translation.

What is a polysystem?

Before explaining Even-Zohar's concept of the polysystem, it is necessary to look at the Russian Formalist, or more specifically Jurij Tynjanov's, concept of literary systems. The Formalist approach was essentially one that approached a literary text as dissociated from its context and viewed literary history as a linear tradition. This meant that Formalists looked at the literary work as an entity in itself, not as a product of the time and place from which it comes. Tynjanov argued that this approach is not possible or advisable and that works will have to be studied as part of the contexts in which they are produced. Formalism believed in the 'literariness' of a work, or the innovative qualities that make that work unique. Tynjanov's question was how one could figure out innovation in a work if one did not know the tradition. In order to explain this relationship, he brought in the concept of 'system' – according to this, literary traditions, genres, or even a literary work formed different systems working in dialectical relation to each other. As Gentzler puts it, "Literary traditions composed different systems, literary genres formed systems, a literary work itself was also a unique system, and the entire social order comprised another system, all of which were interrelated, "dialectically" interacting with each other, and conditioning how any specific formal element could function" (112).

The polysystem theory, unlike the Formalist approach, views literature as part of a large interconnected network of systems that have a dialectical relationship with each other. Translations also form a part of this polysystem.

Even-Zohar worked further with this theory of systems. He called the entire network of interrelated systems as a polysystem. This included literary as well as non-literary systems and was used to explain canonical as well as non-canonical literary works. It was actually a theory of literature that was extended to the field of translation studies. This theory could analyse the position of translated literature in a given literary system. Even-Zohar's theory had direct relation to his work in Hebrew literature. Hebrew lacked original texts and its literature owed much to works translated from Russian and Yiddish literature. In other words, translations had a central position in Hebrew literature. This is what prompted Even-Zohar to think further about the position that translations can occupy in the literature of a particular language.

The position of translations

Even-Zohar considered translations to be part of the polysystem of literature. Their position in the polysystem would vary, depending upon the nature of the literary system it belongs to. It is generally believed that translations occupy a secondary position in a given literary system. Even-Zohar disagreed with this; he believed that it could be occupy a primary (central) or secondary (peripheral) position, depending on the larger system it was part of. This was the centre point of his essay "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem" (1978).

There are three situations in which translated literature would maintain a primary position:

- when a literature is young or in the process of being formed,

- when a literature is weak or peripheral
- when a literature is facing a crisis (Venuti, 194)

"Whether translated literature becomes central or peripheral, and whether this position is connected with innovatory ("primary") or conservatory ("secondary") repertoires, depends on the specific constellation of the polysystem under study" – Even-Zohar.

According to Even-Zohar, in the first two cases translations play an important part because the language/literature is inadequate to express a wide range of experiences in the contemporary world. Translations can also bring in a whole new set of literary genres that are nonexistent in the literature of that language. Very often these translations give examples of works that are departures from the norm, motivating the receptor language to experiment with genres. Even-Zohar believed that this is true of translations into a language like Hebrew. Here translated works were not only sources of new ideas, but also the works to which the creative writers in that language looked up to.

But the case is different with the literatures of developed cultures like English. There can be times when the literature seems to stagnate without any fresh blood to invigorate it. At such junctures in the history of a literature, translations can provide a completely different perspective. The widespread translations from languages like Chinese and Spanish in the 1960s in the U.S is an example of this. Ezra Pound and his translations from the Chinese paved the way for Imagism as a movement in the U.S.

However, it is often the case that translations occupy a secondary position in strong literary traditions like French. There will be already existing forms and traditions of writing in such literatures. In such

situations, translations tend to follow the extant norms rather than set a pattern of their own.

Now we come to another crucial question: why do certain texts get translated into a particular language? Even-Zohar, who was initially a Formalist, had like them thought only of literary factors till then. But in this case he went beyond the realms of 'pure' literature as he had started to expound the diachronic study of literature. So he believed that extraliterary factors played a vital role in the issue of selection of texts. Even-Zohar maintained that the principles of selecting texts for translation are determined by the conditions existing in the target language polysystem. This in turn would determine the centrality or otherwise of the translations. His theory thus stated that the socio-literary conditions of the receptor culture were the deciding factors in the choice of text to be translated. If the receptor language lacked in certain forms or styles or genres, then it was likely to fill up that empty space through translations.

Influence of translation on receptor culture

What is the influence of a translated text on the receptor culture? According to Even-Zohar, this also varies depending on whether its position is central or peripheral in the receptor culture. If it occupies a central position, then the translation will be hailed as an original text. Moreover, the definition of 'translation' itself expands to accommodate what are strictly not translations, like adaptations, imitations or versions. Since the purpose of the translation is to introduce something new to the receptor culture, the translation will retain the qualities of the original. This might result in alienating readers who are not comfortable with a radically new form or idea, but the fact remains that the translation will have altered the receptor culture's perceptions of a literary work.

If the translation is in a secondary position, the picture changes. Here the attempt will be to fit into an already existing pattern, rather than set a trend. This is because the receptor culture is strong enough to have well-developed traditions of literature and would not welcome radical departures from the norm. So this will not encourage experimentation in form or thought, but will expect adherence to its rules of practice. The translation will thus adjust to the receptor culture and not vice versa.

> Translations that occupy a central position in a literary polysystem will not follow the literary norms of the receptor language.
> However, they will abide by the receptor language norms if they are in a peripheral position.

Translations that occupy primary position will try to retain the flavour of the original and will emphasize their fidelity or faithfulness to the original. Translations that are considered secondary, on the other hand, will be eager to please the receptor culture and cannot afford to be like the original. It will have to be 'smoothed over' by making it more like the receptor culture. Naturally they will not have the quality of being faithful to the original. Indian language works which are translated into English usually have glosses for culture-specific terms, or are more Anglicised. This is because translations of Indian language works have a peripheral position in the Anglo-American literary polysystem.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Theory

Polysystem theory did take into consideration the social contexts that give birth to literature. It also systematized literature, translated or otherwise, into various strata. However, there were objections to the way in which Even-Zohar built up a hierarchy for languages. There were many who felt that this was too simplistic and that the hierarchy given by Even-Zohar had many other explanations too. For example, if one language is lower down the social hierarchy, does that mean that the language is inferior?

The major disadvantage of the theory is that it ignores non-literary factors in the formation of hierarchy in languages and literatures.

Consider the case of Indian languages like Hindi and English in India. Hindi does not have the power and prestige of English in India . Most of the translation work in India is from Hindi / Indian languages into English. If we go with Even-Zohar's initial theory, this would mean that Hindi is an inferior language and culture, which is relatively new when compared to English. But we all know that this is a very superficial and simplistic assumption and the reality of the situation is complicated by a host of non-literary reasons. Even-Zohar took all these into consideration and did try to modify his theory.Today, Polysystem theory has travelled far from these initial premises and is looking into the non-literary factors that govern translation as well.

Gideon Toury

Gideon Toury is known for his work in the area similar to Even-Zohar. His most famous work is *In Search of a Theory of Translation* , which is a collection of his papers based on his field study in translation, published in 1980. He first started off by working on a larger project which was "The History of Literary Translation into Hebrew" in which he tried to understand the actual reasons behind choice of works to be translated, and to discover if there was a set of rules that governed translations within a particular polysystem. Toury's theory was that the reasons for choosing a particular work to translate were more often non-literary or ideological than literary. It was also guided by the personal preference of the translator and the purpose of the translation. It is no wonder that Toury's translation theories are thought to be target-oriented.

Toury disagreed with translation theories that were source-oriented. Translation theories down the years tried to evaluate their adequacy in terms of the correspondence of the translation with the source text. Toury's theory opposed this concept. He believed that translations were somewhere in the middle between two opposing poles – that of complete equivalence or correspondence with the source text, and of complete acceptability in the target language. He maintained that no translation can ever be completely acceptable in a receptor culture as it will have many new elements that cannot easily be assimilated. The converse is also true that no translation can ever be completely true to the source language as it will be governed by different cultural norms.

Toury's Concept of Translation Norms

Toury rightly pointed out that from the target language perspective, the issue of equivalence in translation is a matter with direct practical implications. It cannot be denied that the translated text is considered to be the representative entity of the source language text. Rejecting all theories which gave primacy to the source language work, Toury focused on the actual relationships between the source text and the translation (or "factual replacement" as he terms it). He did not discredit the linguistic and literary elements that go into the making of a translation, but he introduced a set of new features. As Gentzler puts it: "The eventual goal of Toury's theory was to establish a hierarchy of interrelated factors (constraints) that determine (govern) the translation product. In short, Toury demanded that translation theory include cultural-historical "facts", a set of laws that he calls "translation norms" (Gentzler 127). In the inclusion of cultural-historical elements, he is close to Even-Zohar, but he went further than that.

> As far as the target language is concerned, the translation represents the source text. This translation is governed by a set of norms that are prevalent in the target culture.

His essay "The Nature and Role of Norms in Literary Translation" explains his concept very clearly. According to this there will be a set of multiple norms in any society at a particular period in time. These norms might be in conflict with each other, but a methodical study over a period of time can reveal a specific pattern underneath the seemingly disjointed set of norms. In translation, this means that different translations of the same text in different time periods in the same culture would indicate the prevalent norms.

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Three Kinds of Norms

Toury outlined three kinds of norms in translation: Preliminary, Initial and Operational.Preliminary norms are those which influence the translation strategy, and decision as to which workto translate in a particular polysystem. Toury says that this norm is concerned with the existence of atranslation policy, and also that of the directness of translation. By translation policy he means "those factors that govern the choice of text types; or even of individual texts, tobe imported through translation into a particular culture / language at a particular point in time" (Toury, "The Nature and Role of Norms in Translation", 202). This means that a lot of factors need to

Norms consist of the personal preferences of the translator as well as external factors like the socio‐cultural conditions that influence her/him.

be taken into consideration before a work is translated into a particular culture. The literary preferences of a given language or culture are bound to have a major role in deciding the nature and choice of text to be translated. The concern of directness of translation involves questions of what sort of translations the receptor culture will tolerate. These are the preliminary norms in the process of translation, and lie outside the personal preference of the translator.

Initial norms are the personal decisions that the translator has to make with respect to translation strategy. For instance, should s/he remain close to the source text in her/ his translation method or should s/he be more loyal to the target language? Toury warns that one should not be carried away by the term 'initial' to think that is chronologically the first step in the practice of translation. He clarifies that it is but an "explanatory tool". Next are Operational norms, which are those that govern the actual practice of translation, or as Toury defines them, those "directing the decisions made during the act of translation itself" (202). This is influenced by the position occupied by the translated text in the target culture.

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Contributions of the Theory

Toury's theory seemed to occupy two opposing theoretical poles. On the one hand he was strongly opposed to the idea of source-oriented translation. But in the practical application of his theories, he often was forced to do a comparative analysis of different translations of the same text. Instead of using real-life examples, he made use of an ideal translation that was often imaginary. He acknowledged that he needed this "invariant of comparison" to locate the translation between his two poles of source-oriented and target-oriented translations. This paradoxically leads to the concept of universals underlying superficial differences in languages and cultures, which contradicted his notion of practical and target-oriented translation theory.

> Toury himself admits to the difficulty in determining norms because of the "socio-cultural specificity of norms and their basic instability".

Despite this, Toury's theory has contributed to translation studies in many ways. His theories brought in socio-cultural factors that were largely ignored hitherto in the process of translation. Gentzler points out four ways in which Toury influenced translation studies:

1. The notion of complete linguistic and literary equivalence was abandoned.
2. The literary tendencies of the target culture as determining factors on translation were acknowledged.
3. The notion of an original text with stable meaning was undermined.
4. Both original and translated texts were seen as parts of an interrelated semiotic web.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of Toury's theory was that it took into consideration the fact that translation is an empirical activity undertaken in the real world, and that translators are people driven by their ideology in their choice of translations. Translation then becomes an activity that spreads beyond the purely linguistic and literary realms with far-reaching implications in the actual world.

Assignments

1. What is the contribution of Itamar Even-Zohar to the field of Translation Studies? Do you think his theory is relevant today?
2. Do you agree with Toury's concepts of norms in translation? Why?

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