

XXX. Polysystem Theory

Polysystem theory was developed in the 1970s by the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar borrowing ideas from the Russian Formalists of the 1920s, who had worked on literary historiography. A literary work is here not studied in isolation but as part of a literary system, which itself is defined as 'a system of functions of the literary order which are in continual interrelationship with other orders' (Tynjanov 1927/71: 72). Literature is thus part of the social, cultural, literary and historical framework and the key concept is that of the system, in which there is an ongoing dynamic of 'mutation' and struggle for the primary position in the literary canon.

Although building on work by the Formalists, Even-Zohar reacts against 'the fallacies of the traditional aesthetic approach' (Even-Zohar 1978: 119), which had focused on 'high' literature and had disregarded as unimportant literary systems or genres such as children's literature, thrillers and the whole system of translated literature. Even-Zohar (p. 118) emphasizes that translated literature operates as a system:

1. in the way the TL selects works for translation;
2. in the way translation norms, behaviour and policies are influenced by other co-systems.

The hierarchy referred to (in Shuttleworth and Cowie's definition) is the positioning and interaction at a given historical moment of the different strata of the polysystem.

If the highest position is occupied by an innovative literary type, then the lower strata are likely to be occupied by increasingly conservative types. On the other hand, if the conservative forms are at the top, innovation and renewal are likely to come from the lower strata. Otherwise a period of stagnation occurs (Even-Zohar 1978: 120). This 'dynamic process of evolution' is vital to the polysystem, indicating that the relations between innovatory and conservative systems are in a constant state of flux and competition. Because of this flux, the position of translated literature is not fixed either. It may occupy a primary or a secondary position in the polysystem. If it is primary, 'it participates actively in shaping the centre of the polysystem' (Even-Zohar 1978/2000: 193). It is likely to be innovatory and linked to major events of literary history as they are taking place.

If translated literature assumes a secondary position, then it represents a peripheral system within the polysystem. It has no major influence over the central system and even becomes a conservative element, preserving conventional forms and conforming to the literary norms of the target system.

Even-Zohar (pp. 196-7) suggests that the position occupied by translated literature in the polysystem conditions the translation strategy. If it is primary, translators do not feel constrained to follow target literature models and are more prepared to break conventions. They thus often produce a TT that is a close match in terms of adequacy, reproducing

the textual relations of the ST. This in itself may then lead to new SL models. On the other hand, if translated literature is secondary translators tend to use existing target culture models for the TT and produce more 'non-adequate' translations (p. 197).

Text by Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies*

Reading Guidelines:

Take notes for individual paragraphs. Do not let the text gang up against you. You are also supposed to take care of points listed in numbers, the figures, the tables and documentation.

Q.I Give the exact meaning of the following words first in English and second in Arabic: formalists, historiography, dynamic, mutation, primary, fallacies, genres, thrillers, norms, positioning, interaction, innovative, strata, conservative, stagnation, flux, peripheral, conventional, conforming to, conditions, constrained.

Q.II Derive as many words as you can from the following words: formalists, dynamic, operates, selects, hierarchy, evolution, constant, fixed, assumes, conditions, constrained, match.

Q.III Give the opposites of the words below and use them in good English sentences of your own: borrowing, isolation,

continual, reacts against, interaction, increasingly, stagnation, actively, peripheral, conventional, constrained, close, existing.

Q.IV Answer the following questions briefly:

1. What was the look to literature within the formalist school?
2. What was wrong with the traditional aesthetic approach that Zohar reacted against?
3. How does translated literature function as a system?
4. Do you agree with the alternation of the innovatory and conservative literary types in assuming primary and secondary positions?
5. What happens when translated literature occupy primary or secondary position?
6. How do translators look when translated literature assume primary or secondary position?

Q.V Read, discuss and translate into plain Arabic the part of the text starting from "Because of this flux..." To the end of the text which speaks about the positioning of translated literature.

Research Activity:

Research briefly the merits and demerits of polysystem theory. An excellent source you may start with is Jeremy Munday's *Introducing Translation Studies*.

Quote of the Day:

Through the act of translation we break out of linguistic confinement and reach many other communities

Ngugi wa Thiong'o