Distinguished Lecture Series

Reflections on Polysystem Theory as a Tool for Translation and Culture Research

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Abstract

Polysystem theory, by initiating the cultural turn, has played a key role in the establishment of translation studies as an academic discipline in its own right. It has taken us from prescriptive, text-centred translation studies into wider and wider fields, some of which have been untrodden and even forbidden.

The theory has enabled me, for example, to explore relations between translation norms, ideologies and other socio-cultural factors such as cultural self-image, explain the development of translation studies in China in terms of intercultural repertoire transfer, and touch on broader social issues such as academic freedom and human rights.

In my opinion, the potential of polysystem theory remains largely untapped.

Publications

- On polysystem theory:

- "Polysystem Theory: Its Prospect As a Framework for Translation Research", *Target*, Vol. 13, Issue 2, pp. 317-332, 2001. (translated into Italian in 2009 and into Vietnamese in 2014)

- "A Missing Link in Even-Zohar's Theoretical Thinking", *Target*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, pp. 135-148, 2008.

- "Polysystem Theory and Translation", *Handbook of Translation Studies*: Volume 1, Yves Gambier and Luc van Doorslaer (ed.), pp. 257-263, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010.
- "In Defence of Polysystem Theory", *Target*, Vol. 23, Issue 2, pp. 311-347, 2011.
- 《多元系統翻譯研究──理論、實踐與回應》(*Polysystem Studies of Translation: Theory, Practice and Response*), Changsha: Hunan People's Press, 2012.

- On other theories:

- "A Polysystemist's Response to Prescriptive Cultural Relativism and Postcolonialism", *Across Languages and Cultures*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, pp. 133-154, 2017.
- "Voices from the Periphery: Further Reflections on Universalism versus Relativism in Translation Studies". *Perspectives*, Vol. 26, Issue 4, pp. 463-477, 2018.

- Case studies:
- "Repertoire Transfer and Resistance: The Westernization of Translation Studies in China", *The Translator*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, pp. 305-325, 2009.
- "翻譯研究、學術規範與文化傳統 (Translation Studies, Academic Norms and Cultural Traditions),",《中國翻譯》, Vol. 31, Issue 2, pp. 73-80, 2010.

- "Does 'Translation' Reflect a Narrower Concept Than 'Fanyi'?--On the Impact of Western Theories on China and the Concern about Eurocentrism", *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, Vol. 10, Issue 2, pp. 223-242, 2015.
- "Auto-Image and Norms in Source-Initiated Translation in China", *Asia Pacific Translation and Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, pp. 96-107, 2015.

- "Self-image and Self-reflection: From China's Outbound Translation Strategies to Her Cultural Export Policy". *Babel*, Vol. 63, Issue 5, pp. 643-666, 2017.

- Monographs:

- 2004. 《中西譯學批評》 [Criticism of Chinese and Western Translation Theories]. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.
- 2012.《多元系統翻譯研究──理論、實踐與回應》(*Polysystem Studies of Translation: Theory, Practice and Response*), Changsha: Hunan People's Press.

Relations between cultural phenomena

- Source-initiated efforts to disseminate Chinese literature
- Anxiety about lack of success
- Foreignizing/source-oriented translation strategies in the C-E direction
- 戲曲中心 translated into "Xiqu Centre" in Hong Kong and Taiwan

- Proliferation of Confucius Institutes
- Chinese "dancing grannies" in Western landmarks
- Foreign Minister lecturing Canadian reporter

Polysystem Theory
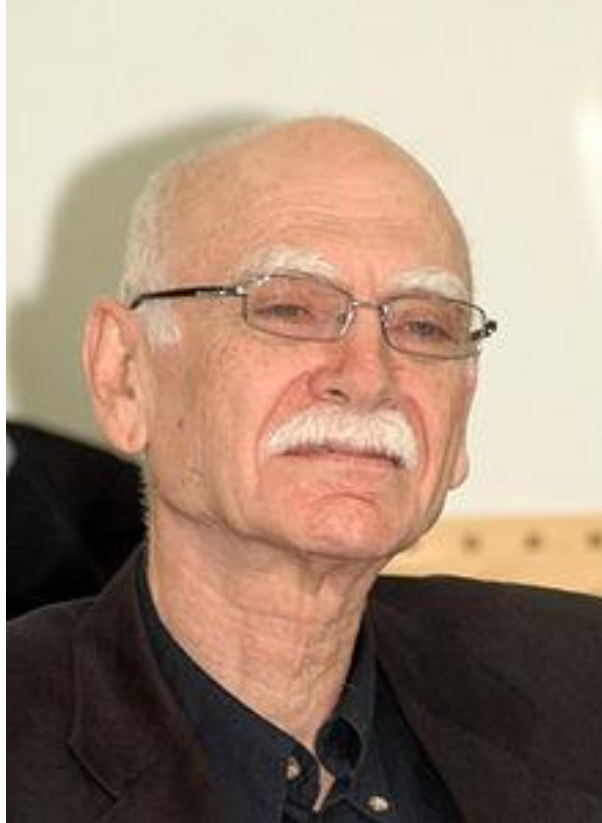
- Itamar Even-Zohar (1939-)
- Unit of Culture Research
- University of Tel Aviv

Background

- 1960s: Linguistic turn in the study of translation:

- Catford, J. C. (1965) *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nida, Eugene A. (1964) *Toward A Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*, Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Problems perceived by some scholars

- Treating translation as purely or primarily a matter of linguistic operation is a perspective too narrow for "the complex of problems clustered round the phenomenon" (Holmes 1988: 67)
- The linguistic paradigms have provided no theoretical tools for the description of translational norms without value judgements (Toury 2000: 279)

The Theory:

- Developed in the early 1970s for the study of literary translation
- Evolved into a general theory of culture in the 1990s

- polysystem theory is intended to "eliminate *all* sorts of biases" (Even-Zohar 1979: 292–293) and to serve as a framework for seeking less simplistic explanations to the complicated questions of how literature or translation is correlated with other sociocultural factors such as economics, politics and ideology.

- Constituents of culture (such as language, literature and technology) as systems rather than conglomerates of disparate elements.

- These elements are inter-related and that their relations are not haphazard but largely determined by their position in the whole to which they belong.

- (A basic assumption in systems thinking: everything is related to everything else.)

- Such a system is conceived of as a heterogeneous, open structure, "a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole" (Even-Zohar 1990: 11).

- Even-Zohar coined the term "polysystem" to counter the traditional notion that a system is a closed, single set of relations.

- On the one hand, each cultural system consists of various sub-systems that are themselves polysystems. On the other hand, each is a part of a larger polysystem – the whole culture, and thus related to all other co-systems within that whole.

- In other words, a system is simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous, as the activities within the system are governed by the norms originating from that particular system and others.

- Consequently, phenomena in a system can rarely be fully accounted for by aspects of that system alone, but must often be placed in the context of the whole culture, and sometimes even of world culture, the largest polysystem in human society.

- Inter-systemic relations:

- Hierarchical: centres and peripheries
- Dynamic: systemic positions constantly changing

Three hypotheses on translated literature

- 1. Translated literature is a (poly-)system (within the literary polysystem)

- 2. Translated literature normally occupies a peripheral position in the literary polysystem. Nevertheless, it may become a part of the centre, acting as a vehicle for introducing new repertoires into a certain target literature.

- Three typical cases :

- a. when a literature is "young", that is, in the process of being developed into a full-fledged polysystem;
- b. when a literature is either peripheral (in the macro-polysystem of a group of correlated literatures) or weak; and
- c. when there are turning points, crises or vacuums in a literature.

- 3. Translation norms depends on the position of translated literature:
  - Central: adequate (source-oriented, foreignizing)
  - Peripheral: non-adequate (target-oriented, domesticating)

    (Even-Zohar 1990a)

Values behind (Even-Zohar's) PS theory

- **1. Descriptivism**: against value judgements; distinction between criticism and research;

- Toury: DTS (Descriptive Translation Studies) :

- to study norms, not to set norms

- **2. Neutrality**: against both elitism and democratic ideas (reverse elitism)

- The concept of system allows us to describe power in its various ramifications… in a fairly 'neutral' way (Lefevere 1987)

- **3. Detachment** (warns against taking the "inside view" of the "people-in-the-culture")

Impact

- As with Pandora's box, the PS hypothesis may let loose many questions the answers for which are neither easy nor always pleasant. (Even-Zohar 1978: 35)

- Provide a framework for translation research
- Widen the scope of translation studies by:
- including texts that were not regarded as translations previously
- focusing on the relations of translation to the cultures in which it took place

- Led to a dramatic change in direction—the cultural turn
- Led to a boom in research
- Contributed to the establishment of translation studies as an academic discipline in its own right, on a par with linguistics and comparative literature

- Even-Zohar's polysystem theory has been embraced by students of literature and culture all over the world. The theory has proven particularly relevant in Spain and China.

  - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Itamar_Even-Zohar

- **The International Society for Polysystem Studies** (ISPS) is dedicated to strengthening and extending the application of rigorously grounded "relational thinking" to the study of culture. The prime theoretical point of departure for our efforts is the body of cultural theory generated […] by Itamar Even-Zohar.

  – https://polysystemstudies.wordpress.com/

- Research focusing on norms and power without trying to support them will always be perceived as a threat. (Lambert 1995: 134-135).

Dissemination of Chinese literature

- Literary translation into English initiated in China from 1949 to the early 1980s:
  - Translated mostly by residents in China;
  - Published in Beijing by a state-run press;
  - Main Market: China

- Hence, governed by source-culture norms

- Lack of success in source-initiated efforts to disseminate Chinese literature
- Strategies adopted by translators of Chinese origin tend to be more source-oriented than those adopted by English-speaking translators working for Western publishers at least since the 1970s

- Lessons to be learn from PS theory:
- As Euro-American cultures of the present day are in central positions, target-oriented translation strategies can maximize the chance of the translation being accepted.

- In other words, translation strategies have to be chosen in light of target conditions if the purpose is for the translated text to function in the target system.

- Some scholars blame the failure on inappropriate use of foreignizing strategies under the influence of the traditional concept of the "primacy of the original" (Xie Tianzhen)

- Certain concepts of translation that were derived from inbound translation practice in the past two thousand years […], such as "faithfulness to the original" as the sole translation criterion and the "primacy of the original", have taken root in the minds of the officials and translators involved.

- They use these concepts, criterion and methodology […] to guide today's outbound translation of Chinese literary and cultural classics, and continue to be concerned only about translation problems on the linguistic level […] (Xie 2014: 7)

- 在两千年来的译入翻译实践 (从古代的佛经翻译到清末民初以来的文学名著、社科经典翻译) 中形成的译学理念———奉"忠实原文"为翻译的唯一标准、拜"原文至上"为圭臬等———已经深深地扎根在这些领导和翻译工作者的脑海之中，他们以建立在译入翻译实践基础上的这些翻译理念、标准、方法论来看待和指导今天中国文学、文化典籍的译出行为 […]

- However, findings from a case study indicate a gradual shifts of translation norms (in translations done by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Young) since the 1950s:

Shift of norms in the translation of Chinese weights and measures

Unit	1940s	1950s	1970s	1988-
畝 (*mu*)	acre	***mou***	*mu*	----
里 (*li*)	miles	miles	***li***	*li*
斤 (*jin*)	catty	catty/pound	catty	***jin***
尺 (*chi*)	foot	foot	foot	***chi***

- 畝 (*mu*): unit of area, 1/6 acre
- 里 (*li*): less than 1/3mile
- 斤 (*jin*): 1.1—1.3 pound
- 尺 (*chi*): a little longer than 1 foot

- Since the traditional concept of translation remains relatively stable, there must have been changes in some other socio-cultural factors that induce the shift of norms for outbound translation.

- Where can we find the explanations?
  - Translated literature in central position: source-oriented
  - Translated literature in peripheral position: target-oriented
- This applies to target-initiated, inbound translation

- Gideon Toury:
- Translations are facts of the target culture and that they are "as good as initiated by the target culture" (Toury 1995: 23–27)

- As I argued in another paper, since it is all agreed, by Even-Zohar and his critics alike, that it is the people's perception of their culture's situation that determines the position of translated literature, this hypothesis can be reformulated as follows:

- Translated literature tends to assume a central position in the literary polysystem **when there is a general sense of self-insufficiency**, which is likely to arise in three situations:

– when a literature is "young;"

– when a literature is "peripheral;" and

– when there are turning points, crises, or vacuums in a literature. (Chang 2011: 316–318)

- sense of self-insufficiency = sense of weakness = sense of inferiority = low self-image

- the position of in-bound translated literature is in inverse relation to the self-image of the target literature or culture.

- Where inbound translation is concerned, a high cultural auto-image will favour target-oriented translation norms while a low one will favour source-oriented norms, but where outbound translation is concerned, I suggest that the opposite is usually true.

- Out-bound translation
  - Low self-image: target-oriented strategies
  - High self-image: source -oriented strategies

- These translations in effect served to enhance the self-image of (official) Chinese culture rather than improve the position of Chinese culture in the polysystem of the world (Chang 2004: 224-225).

- Self-manufactured symbolic cultural goods that signified prestige for Chinese literature and culture to the Chinese people-in-culture

- Largely facts of one culture only—that of the source

- Self-image of official/mainstream Chinese culture in the past 100 years:

- Lowest to very high

- The 1920s: inbound translation was used as a means to reform the target language and culture

- The 2000s: one of the purposes of outbound translation is supposedly to impose the linguistic norms of the source language on English

- Foreignization in translation is a means to establish "Sino-English" as a new variety of internationalized English, which is a natural consequence of China's enhanced prestige and the increasing role she plays in international affairs. (Pan 2004)

- 随着中国国际威望的提高，通过异化翻译来给英语增加"中国英语"这个变体，挑战英语国家的霸权主义，令英语进一步国际化，既合乎情理，也合乎"新的翻译理论潮流"（潘文国 2004）。

- In the 1950s, the same translator adopted source-oriented strategies in inbound translation but target-oriented ones in outbound translation when dealing with weights and measures.

- Anxiety about the lack of success: appeared only around or after the late 1990s

- Contentment or resignation before the 1990s

- 戲曲中心 "Xiqu Centre" in Hong Kong:
- Runs counter to the translation tradition in Hong Kong in two ways:
  - Chinese-English translation strategies have tended to be target-oriented
  - transliteration into English has mostly been based on pronunciation in Cantonese

- 戲曲中心 "Xiqu Centre" in Taiwan:
- Taiwan Minister of Culture:
  - declaration of cultural subjectivity
  - 文化主體性的宣示
  - invite the Western World to learn the word xiqu
  - 請西方世界學會認識Xiqu（戲曲）這個詞
    - (*United Daily News* 2014)

- The heightening of cultural self-image in Taiwan must have been a spillover from mainland China, across the ideological and political divide.

Confucius Institutes:

- One of the most aggressive forms of cultural export in the world today

- Affiliated to a local university but "exists as a virtually autonomous unit within the regular curriculum of the host school", conducting its business according to Chinese laws and the policies of the Chinese authorities, sometimes in breach of local norms and laws.

- A number of Confucius Institutes have been closed by the host universities

- The Director General of Hanban has antagonized the European Association for Chinese Studies

- Chinese "dancing aunties", that is, groups of elderly women dancing in public squares with loud boomboxes, have made their presence felt in front of the Louvre in Paris, in Sunset Park in New York City, and in the Red Square in Moscow, sometimes necessitating the intervention of the police
  - (*Wall Street Journal* 2014)

- Another attempt by Chinese culture to assert itself/export or at least display its repertoires

- A further question:
- What has caused this heightening of cultural self-image?

- Economic growth
- (Analogy: a nouveau riche wishing to be accepted into "society")

- Do wealth and military might bring instant cultural prestige?
- Even-Zohar's research on French culture says there is no necessary link between the two. (Even-Zohar 2010: 64)

- Result of heightening of self-image:
  - Increasing gap between self-image of Chinese culture and its image abroad

- Solutions:
  - Improve English proficiency?
  - Modify translation strategies?

- Cultural self-reflection
- Wisdom of knowing oneself

Criticisms of PS Theory

- Even-Zohar seldom relates texts to the 'real conditions' of their production, only to hypothetical structural models and abstract generalizations" (Gentzler 1993: 123)

- abstract and depersonalized; ultimately deterministic; take little heed of actual political and social power relations or more concrete entities; as if the whole thing were on automatic pilot; shies away from speculating about the underlying causes; refrain from locating the factors motivating literary or cultural development. (Hermans 1999: 118)

- "daunting level of abstraction" (Hermans 1999: 115)

- because Even-Zohar "masks issues related to [power and political engagement] with his rather **sanitized** vocabulary", "it is difficult to tease out the geopolitical implications of centre and periphery, cultural prestige and so forth in his presentation of the issues" (Tymoczko 2000: 31).

Answers

- Is Official/mainstream Chinese culture an abstract and depersonalized concept?

- A sanitized term?

-

- Do we need to name names?

Another example

- In cultures which think that the people need to be governed, the political and the ideological system are central systems, while other systems, being in more pe-ripheral positions, are more heteronomous than autonomous […] the academic system being no exception (Chang 2010: 78, my translation)

– (Translation Studies, Academic Norms and Cultural Traditions)

- If it is to be expressed in terms that are more concrete, taking heed of "actual political and social power relations or more concrete entities", it will become something like this:

- In the People's Republic of China, where the social elite think that the people should be governed rather than be governing, the Communist Party controls ev- ery social domain, and academics are expected to say what the ruler wants them to say more than tell the truth.

Postscript

- Observing and making observations from Hong Kong

- Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister of China, told a Canadian reporter, "the people who know best about the human rights situations in China are the Chinese people themselves, not you. You don't have the right to speak."
  - 最了解中國人權狀況的不是你，而是中國人自己。你沒有發言權 […]
  - https://zh.wikiquote.org/zh-hk/%E7%8E%8B%E6%AF%85

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