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TRANSLATION STUDIES AND THE POLYSYSTEM THEORY

Streszczenie

Celem poniższego artykułu jest przedstawienie genezy teorii polisystemowej oraz jej znaczenia dla teorii przekładu. Jak się okazuje, teoria ta nadaje przekładowi szczególne znaczenie, podkreślając jego tożsamość przy jednoczesnym nadaniu mu praw do bycia jednym z pełnoprawnych komponentów polisystemów kształtujących kultury narodowe. W środowisku polisystemowym teksty kultury docelowej to teksty, które uczestniczą w dynamicznych przesunięciach wewnątrz polisystemu.

Acquiring popularity among translation scholars in the 70's, the concept of the polysystem was created with the aim of accounting for the analysis and description of literary systems. In his *The Translation Studies Reader* Venuti writes:

In the case of literary texts, the functionalist trend ultimately displaces equivalence as a central concept in translation research by directing attention to the receptor. During the 1970s, Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury set out from the assumption that literary translations are facts of the target system. (...), they theorize literature as "polysystem" of interrelated forms and canons that constitute "norms" constraining the translator's choices and strategies¹.

The idea of polysystem stems from the writings of Russian Formalism and its fascination for the notion of device employed in the text. This is how Itamar Even-Zohar put it:

The theoretical work and research done by Russian Formalism, where what I consider to be the foundations of Polysystem theory emerged, is diverse. It was mostly designed to deal with problems of literature, but since on the one hand the very conception of "literature" had undergone a series of modifications (most importantly in conceiving of it within the larger framework of culture), and since on the other hand linguists and cultural anthropolo-

¹ Venuti, L. (ed) 2000. *The Translation studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge.

gists in Russia never really separated their respective fields from that of “literature” (a separation which is still current in the West), certain hypotheses were conceived almost simultaneously in both literary studies and the latter disciplines by various “formalists”.

As a theory, it was thus never confined to the field of literature, whatever its premises may have been. It now seems to me, after some twenty years of work in the theory, that much the same process has taken place with my own work, and that of other colleagues. There, too, Polysystem theory could not remain confined to the case of literature alone. The reasons for this development perhaps have not been the same as for the Russian Formalists. Yet I believe that they cannot be altogether different. For it does not seem plausible to disconnect what I believe to be the changing conceptions of the subject matter, that is “literature”, from the theoretical possibilities offered by Polysystem theory, whatever its borders or shape might have been for the Russian Formalists or any other predecessors².

The first to enquire into the notion was Boris Ekhennbaum who

saw the work not as a harmonious correlation of parts and wholes but as a dialectic tension among them. ‘The work of art’, Ekhennbaum argued, ‘is always the result of a complex struggle among various form-creating elements; it is always a kind of compromise. These elements do not simply coexist and “correlate”. Depending on the general character of the style, this or that element acquires the role of the organizing dominant governing all other and subordinating them to its needs³.

This line of argument was explored by Jakobson who both emphasized the dominant which ‘may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of structure’ *The Dominant*, Matejka and Pomorska (1971) and broadened the notion by including the idea of historical development. As a matter of fact it must also be noted that Jakobson went further and stated that a dominant may function ‘not only in the poetic work of an individual artist and not only in the poetic canon, the set of norms of a given poetic school, but also in the art of a given epoch, viewed as a particular whole.’⁴

Another notion borrowed from Russian Formalism was the one of system. In the early works of Šklovskij, a poetic work was defined as a mere sum of its artistic devices, while poetic evolution appeared nothing more than a substitution of certain devices. With the further development of Formalism, there arose the accurate conception of a poetic work as a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this framework of a given poetic genres, and, simultaneously, the distribution of artistic devices among the individual

² Even-Zohar, I. 1990. *Polysystem Studies*. [= *Poetics Today* 11:1]. Durham: Duke University Press. A special issue of *Poetics Today*. Accessed online on 10th June 2005 at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/ez_vita/EZ-TOCS-Books.htm>.

³ Steiner, P. 1984. *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

⁴ Matejka, L. and Pomorska, K. 1971 *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

genres. Genres which were originally secondary paths, subsidiary variants, now come to the fore, whereas the canonical genres are pushed toward the rear⁵.

In defining the concept of polysystem, Even-Zohar employed the term of system, firstly suggested by Tynjanov (1929) who saw the term as a complex structure of elements that interact with each other. In this way Tynjanov investigated literary genres and traditions as a whole, including the whole social order (understood as system of systems) in the end.

Polysystem theory itself, which in its earliest stages stemmed directly from Even-Zohar's interest in both translation theory and Hebrew literature, was not launched as an accomplished entity once and for all, but evolved and advanced with the help of other scholars in many countries. The theory has been based on the premise that such semiotic phenomena as language, society or culture could be better accounted for as systems rather than separate entities or as Even-Zohar put it "conglomerates of disparate elements". In light of the above the mere registration and classification of various phenomena was abandoned in favour of the functional approach that aims at the identification of the laws that govern the diversity of the phenomena in question.

However, the serious problem with the functional approach is that it has never been entirely unified as there are two incompatible programs in circulation. Even-Zohar refers to these programs as "the theory of static systems" vs. "the theory of dynamic systems". If the former stems from the Geneva School, the latter emerges from the works of both the Russian Formalists and the Czech Structuralists. The relation between these two polarized programs explains the subtle, yet essential difference between the way Even-Zohar perceives the notions of system and polysystem. Although synonymous to the system, the concept of polysystem stresses the dynamic nature of Even-Zohar's conception of the system and distances itself from the more static, Saussurean tradition connotations.

As far as Even-Zohar's polysystem is concerned we deal of "a heterogeneous, hierarchized conglomerate (or system) of systems which interact to bring about an ongoing, dynamic process of evolution within the polysystem as a whole"⁶. Thus, for instance, the polysystem of a particular national literature is in fact regarded as one of the items that, put together with other items, constitute the bigger socio-cultural polysystem, which in turn consists of other polysystems of human activity.

The next very important characteristic of the polysystem is that its strata or subdivisions invariably compete with each other for the dominant position. In his Polysystem Studies Even-Zohar put it in the following way:

It is the permanent struggle between the various strata, Tynjanov has suggested, which constitutes the (dynamic) synchronic state of the system. It is the victory of one stratum over

⁵ Matejka, L. and Pomorska, K. 1971 *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁶ Baker, M. 1998. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, London and New York: Routledge.

another which constitutes the change on the diachronic axis. In this centrifugal vs. centripetal motion, phenomena are driven from the center to the periphery while, conversely, phenomena may push their way into the center and occupy it. However, with a polysystem one must not think in terms of *one* center and *one* periphery, since several such positions are hypothesized. A move may take place, for instance, whereby a certain item (element, function) is transferred from the periphery of one system to the periphery of an adjacent system within the same polysystem, and then may or may not move on to the center of the latter⁷.

If we look upon the literary polysystem in the above-presented way we will see that we deal with “a continuous state of tension between the center and the periphery, in which different literary genres all vie for domination of the centre” (Baker 1998: 177). It is essential to add that the term of genre is seen in Shklovskij-like manner and consists of both canonized and non-canonized properties. The idea was clearly expressed by Even-Zohar:

It was Shklovskij who seems to have first conceptualized the socio-cultural distinctions of text production in terms of literary stratification. According to him (1921, 1923), in literature certain properties become canonized, while other remain non-canonized. In such a view, by “canonized” one means those literary norms and works (i.e., both models and texts) which are accepted as legitimate by the dominant circles within a culture and whose conspicuous products are preserved by the community to become part of its historical heritage. On the other hand, “non-canonized” means those norms and texts which are rejected by these circles as illegitimate and whose products are often forgotten in the long run by the community (unless they change their status). Canonicity is thus no inherent feature of textual activities on any level: it is no euphemism for “good” versus “bad” literature. The fact that certain features tend, in certain periods, to cluster around certain statuses does not mean that these features are “essentially” pertinent to some status⁸.

All things considered, these are not magna opera solely that constitute the literary polysystem but also such genres as popular fiction, literature for children or, however innovative it may sound, translated works. For Even-Zohar the role of translated literature that is played within the literary polysystem is not of minor importance. Contrary to that he strongly advocates the acknowledgement of limited systemic relationships among the ostensibly isolated translated texts that function within a particular literary polysystem. What is more, Even-Zohar warns against regarding translated literature as peripheral and presents conditions/situations under which it can occupy central positions. The conditions are as follows: “(a) when a poly- system has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is “young”, in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either “peripheral” (within a large group of correlated literatures) or “weak”, 1 or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature”. Further,

⁷ Even-Zohar, I. 1990. Polysystem Studies. [= Poetics Today 11:1]. Durham: Duke University Press. A special issue of Poetics Today. Accessed online on 10 June 2005 at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/ez_vita/EZ-TOCS-Books.htm>.

⁸ Even-Zohar, I. 1990. Polysystem Studies. [= Poetics Today 11:1]. Durham: Duke University Press. A special issue of Poetics Today. Accessed online on 10 June 2005 at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/ez_vita/EZ-TOCS-Books.htm>.

he adds: "I cannot see how any scholarly effort to describe and explain the behavior of the literary polysystem in synchrony and diachrony can advance in an adequate way if that is not recognized. In other words, I conceive of translated literature not only as an integral system within any literary polysystem, but as a most active system within it"⁹.

The polysystem theory also appeared to lay the foundations of the Manipulation School for which "from the point of view of the target literature, all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose." (Hermans 1985:9) In this approach, literary translation is regarded as a text type which constitutes the integral part of the target culture. Here, translation is not a secondary product, the inferior one to its source counterpart. On the contrary, a translation functions within the target culture as a fully fledged text that strives to become the primary text within a particular polysystem.

At this point it must also be added that if we treated translation as one of the literary polysystem's systems we would come to the observation that particular translators or translation schools do play a role within this polysystem. The role could be either central or peripheral, but it could also be struggling for the right position within the polysystem. Surprising though at first it may seem, this role can be quite easily identified by the conscious receiver. Let me give you the example of the recent Polish trend in dubbing, where the ultimate adaptation of the target text to the expectations of the receiver prevails. Apart from the avoidance of transfer the trend in question strongly emphasizes smuggling the idea of translation intertextuality consisting in incorporating ready-made source culture quotations into new translations. As a consequence Polish dubbing resembles a set of communicating tubes in which liquid constituting the matter is in some extent common to each of the dubbed dialogue scripts¹⁰.

Also worth mentioning is the fact that (poly)system does not have to restrict itself to a trend within national or even national literature as such. In his *Translation in systems*, Hermans writes as follows:

(...) 'system' (...) can refer to the poetry scene in *fin de siècle* Berlin, the multilingual culture of colonial North Africa, intellectual life in Ancient Rome. The unit of investigation can be large or small, from the Petrarchan love sonnet in Renaissance Venice to the interdependent art scenes of the Western hemisphere today¹¹.

To conclude, translated works have not yet received due attention from the literary theory being regarded as uninteresting and peripheral in character – in fact they constitute a separate set of literary works that evolve and live – paradoxically –

⁹ Even-Zohar, I. 1990. *Polysystem Studies*. [= *Poetics Today* 11:1]. Durham: Duke University Press. A special issue of *Poetics Today*. Accessed online on 10 June 2005 at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/ez_vita/EZ-TOCS-Books.htm>.

¹⁰ The most famous Polish representative of this trend is the contemporary film translator Bartosz Wierzbicka.

¹¹ Hermans, T. 1999. *Translation in Systems*, Manchester: St. Jerome.

constantly updated and reinterpreted, they influence and shape the original work within the minds of those who do not have access to the original text.

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