

Handout (2)

Polysystem Theory

Inspired by Russian Formalism, particularly the work of Roman Jakobson, Jurij Tynjanov, Boris Ejxenbaum.

System: “the network of relations that can be hypothesized for a certain set of assumed observables (“occurrences”/“phenomena”)” (Even-Zohar 1990:27).

Literary System: “the network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called “literary” and consequently these activities themselves observed via that network” (ibid:28).

Even-Zohar, Itamar (1990) *Polysystem Studies*, Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, and Durham: Duke University Press. Special issue of *Poetics Today*, 11(1).

Even-Zohar’s Scheme/Model of the Literary System

Institution: all factors involved in maintaining literature as a socio-cultural activity (critics, publishing houses, periodical, clubs, the media, governing bodies, etc.).

Repertoire: rules and materials that govern the making and use of any given product. The idea of a repertoire assumes the existence of shared knowledge and values.

Product: outcome of any action or activity, in this case a literary one: text, utterance, image, event, textual fragment – as well as writers, distributors, publishers, etc. Products cannot be made without a *repertoire*.

Producers: both conditioning and conditioned force in the system. Individuals who produce literary products by operating or manipulating existing repertoires. Constitute part of the literary institution and literary market and operate not just as individuals but as groups or social communities of people engaged in text production.

Consumers: we are all indirect consumers of literature, at least receiving fragments of literary texts that we receive through a variety of sources. There are groups of consumers, generally referred to as *the public*. Patterns of behaviour characteristic of a certain public will exert some influence on the behaviour of other factors and on the fate of a product.

Market: the aggregate of factors involved with the selling and buying of literary products, e.g. bookshops, book clubs, libraries, as well as teachers.

Jakobson’s scheme:



Even-Zohar’s scheme:



Generally speaking, human beings (writers, consumers, publishers, etc.) are unpredictable variables, but this doesn't mean that they write, publish, read, translate, buy books, etc. in a historical or social vacuum. Texts and translations are influenced by a set of interrelated factors, but not in a mechanistic or totally predictable way.

Literature as a system is linked to other systems, hence the idea of **polysystem**. A literary system is linked to

(a) other literary systems

(b) other social and cultural systems.

(1) Polysystem theory assumes that a polysystem (of anything, literature, culture, etc.) consists of a number of systems, which in turn consist of a number of sub-systems.

(2) These systems and sub-systems are not closed – they interact with each other and are dynamic (*dynamic process of evolution*). Therefore, it is not possible or desirable to consider, for instance, children's literature in isolation of adult literature nor, for that matter, translated literature in isolation of original literature. Note that translated literature is recognized here as a system in its own right.

(3) Not all polysystems are structured in the same way. In particular, literary polysystems vary in their degree of 'openness' to influence from other literary and cultural polysystems.

(4) The relationship between the systems and sub-systems is **hierarchical**, meaning that some occupy a central/primary position and others occupy a peripheral/secondary one.

Primary systems take the initiative in introducing new forms and models in literature; they are responsible for innovation.

Secondary systems are conservative and derivative in their activity; they conform to established models and codes and do not introduce anything new (new modes of writing, new genres, new modes of translation, etc.).

(5) *Translated literature* may form a separate sub-system (with its own distinctive features, practices and models) or may be more or less fully integrated into the indigenous system. Moreover, it may occupy a **central** or **peripheral position**, and may therefore behave as a **primary system** (introducing new forms, being innovative) or **secondary system** (conforming to established forms and acting as a force for preserving the existing models in the receiving literature).

Whether translated literature occupies a primary or secondary position depends on what else is happening in the polysystem as a whole. But what this means is that translated literature is capable of playing a leading role in the target literary system, of being an innovative force in the receiving culture.

Even-Zohar specifies a number of situations in which this may happen (i.e. in which translations may act as a primary system):

(a) when a given literary polysystem has not yet taken shape: when a literature is young or in the process of being established.

(b) when a literature is either peripheral or weak or both. This is a problematic notion, and several scholars have argued that a literature cannot be 'weak' – though it may perceive itself as weak or inferior to other literatures.

(c) when there are crises or literary vacuums in a literary system. A literary vacuum may be a particular genre or may be the result of the older models dying out, because they no longer relate to contemporary needs, and the vacuum they leave behind then has to be filled by new ideas brought in through translation.

Otherwise, the normal position assumed by translated literature is a secondary one.