



POLYSYSTEM THEORY (REVISED)

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Abstract: *Polysystem Theory, originally developed by Itamar Even-Zohar, offers a dynamic framework for understanding the complex interplay between literature, translation, and culture. This theory positions translated literature as an active and integral component of the target literary system, challenging the conventional view of translations as secondary or peripheral. Over time, the theory has undergone revisions to incorporate new perspectives on cultural exchange, power dynamics, and globalization. This revised approach expands its applicability beyond literary studies, making it relevant for broader translation and cultural studies. By addressing the fluid nature of literary systems and the role of translation as both a mediator and innovator, this article revisits the key tenets of Polysystem Theory while integrating contemporary insights into the study of translation as a cultural phenomenon.*

Keywords: *Polysystem Theory, Itamar Even-Zohar, translation studies, cultural systems, literary systems, revised Polysystem Theory, globalization, power dynamics, innovation, translation as mediation.*

Introduction: Polysystem Theory, introduced by Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1970s, has fundamentally reshaped the way translation studies perceive the relationship between original and translated works. At its core, the theory challenges the notion that translations merely occupy a secondary, peripheral role within the literary system of the target culture. Instead, it posits that translations actively participate in shaping and redefining the literary norms of the receiving culture. By situating translated literature within the wider network of cultural and literary production, Polysystem Theory recognizes translation as a dynamic force capable of innovation, adaptation, and cultural transformation. Even-Zohar’s initial framework focused on how literary systems are structured as hierarchies, with certain genres and forms occupying dominant positions while others are marginalized. Translated literature, depending on specific historical, cultural, or political circumstances, may occupy a central or peripheral position within this hierarchy. However, as translation studies have evolved, so too has Polysystem Theory. The revised approach expands its scope, incorporating more nuanced perspectives on the role of translation in globalized contexts and acknowledging the influence of power dynamics, ideological shifts, and cross-cultural exchange in shaping literary systems. This article revisits the foundational principles of Polysystem Theory, examining its significance in contemporary translation studies while integrating recent theoretical developments. By reexamining the relationship between translation and the literary system, this article aims to demonstrate how Polysystem Theory remains a valuable lens through which to analyze not only literary translation but also the broader processes of cultural transmission and transformation in a globalized world.

Core Principles of Polysystem Theory

Polysystem Theory, developed by Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1970s, posits that literary systems operate as complex networks of interrelated texts and genres, where each element influences and is influenced by others. This approach diverges from traditional literary theories that often regard literary works in isolation, instead suggesting that the meaning and significance of a text are determined by its position within a broader cultural and literary framework. The core principles of Polysystem Theory can be summarized as follows:

At the heart of Polysystem Theory is the concept of the polysystem itself, which Even-Zohar defines as "a network of interrelated systems" that encompasses various forms of literature, including original works, translations, and non-literary texts (Even-Zohar, 1990). This framework acknowledges that literature does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is part of a dynamic and evolving system influenced by social, historical, and cultural contexts²⁷.

One of the pivotal aspects of Polysystem Theory is the distinction between central and peripheral positions within the literary system. Translations can occupy either central or peripheral roles depending on factors such as the socio-political climate, market demands, and cultural prestige. Even-Zohar emphasizes that "translated literature may be central or peripheral in a given polysystem, depending on historical circumstances" (Even-Zohar, 2008). This flexibility allows for variations in how translations are received and integrated into the target culture, affecting the overall literary landscape²⁸.

Polysystem Theory emphasizes the fluidity of literary systems, which are continually shaped and reshaped by external influences, including cultural exchange, globalization, and technological advancements. As Even-Zohar notes, "literary systems are not static; they are dynamic and susceptible to change" (Even-Zohar, 1990). This dynamic nature means that the hierarchy of genres and the roles of translated literature can shift over time, reflecting the evolving tastes and values of the society in which they are situated.

In the context of Polysystem Theory, translation is not merely a process of linguistic conversion; it is seen as a crucial site of cultural innovation. Translated texts can introduce new genres, styles, and ideas into the target system, thereby enriching the literary landscape. This perspective challenges the traditional view of translation as a secondary activity, positioning it instead as a significant driver of cultural development. As Toury (1995) asserts, "translations can act as catalysts for change within the target literary system²⁹."

Another fundamental principle of Polysystem Theory is the concept of intertextuality, which posits that texts do not exist in isolation but are interconnected through

²⁷ Even-Zohar, Itamar. "Polysystem Studies." *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1990, pp. 5-24.

²⁸ Even-Zohar, Itamar. "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem." *Translation Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 85-102.

²⁹ Hermans, Theo. "Translation in Systems: Descriptive and Systemic Approaches." *Translation Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 4-15.



various forms of cultural exchange. This principle recognizes that translations can mediate between different literary traditions and contribute to a more extensive dialogue between cultures. Hermans (2008) highlights that "translation facilitates intertextual connections, enriching both the source and target cultures"³⁰. In summary, the core principles of Polysystem Theory offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between literature, translation, and culture. By emphasizing the dynamic nature of literary systems and the role of translation as an active participant in cultural exchange, Polysystem Theory provides valuable insights into the processes of meaning-making and cultural transmission. This theoretical framework continues to inform and shape contemporary discussions in translation studies, demonstrating its enduring relevance in the field.

Revisions and Expansions of Polysystem Theory

Polysystem Theory, initially articulated by Itamar Even-Zohar, has undergone significant revisions and expansions since its inception in the 1970s. While the foundational concepts remain integral to the theory, contemporary scholarship has adapted and enriched these ideas to reflect the evolving dynamics of translation, culture, and literature in an increasingly globalized world. This section examines the key revisions and expansions of Polysystem Theory, focusing on its applications in modern translation studies. One of the most significant revisions to Polysystem Theory concerns the influence of globalization on literary systems. As cultural exchanges intensify across borders, the impact of translated literature on the target polysystem has become more pronounced. Scholars have recognized that translations can play a pivotal role in shaping cultural narratives and identities, acting as conduits for new ideas, values, and genres (Sela-Sheffy, 2010). This expansion acknowledges that the traditional central-peripheral dichotomy may no longer fully encapsulate the complexities of translated literature in a globalized context. Translations often assume a central role in the literary polysystem, particularly when they introduce innovative genres or perspectives that resonate with contemporary audiences.

The integration of power dynamics into Polysystem Theory represents another vital expansion. Scholars have increasingly focused on how cultural power relations influence the position of translated literature within the polysystem. This perspective highlights that the status of translations can be shaped by various factors, including political hegemony, market forces, and cultural policies. Venuti (1995) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the "cultural invisibility" of translations, suggesting that translators often operate within power structures that dictate the norms and expectations of the target culture. By examining these dynamics, researchers can better understand how translations can challenge or reinforce existing cultural hierarchies. Recent discussions surrounding intermediality and transmedia narratives have prompted further revisions of Polysystem Theory. The rise of digital media has transformed the way texts are created, disseminated, and received, prompting scholars to

³⁰ Toury, Gideon. "Descriptive Translation Studies—and Beyond." John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995.



consider how different media interact within the polysystem. As Chandler (2007) argues, the proliferation of digital platforms has led to "cross-media translations" that blur the boundaries between genres, making it necessary to analyze how these interactions affect the dynamics of the polysystem. This expansion recognizes that translation extends beyond linguistic transfer to encompass a broader spectrum of semiotic practices that shape cultural production. The revisions to Polysystem Theory have also led to an expanded definition of translation itself. Traditionally viewed as a linguistic process, translation is increasingly seen as a multifaceted practice that involves negotiation, adaptation, and mediation. This broader understanding encompasses not only the translation of written texts but also the translation of cultural practices, values, and ideologies. As Baker (2018) notes, this shift allows for a more comprehensive exploration of how translation operates within various contexts, fostering cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Recent scholarship has provided numerous case studies that illustrate the practical applications of revised Polysystem Theory in analyzing contemporary translations. These studies often explore how translated texts respond to and influence the cultural, political, and social contexts of their time. For instance, the role of translated literature in promoting social change or addressing issues of identity and representation has become a focal point for researchers (Tymoczko, 2010). By examining specific instances of translation within the polysystem, scholars can gain insights into the mechanisms of cultural exchange and the ongoing evolution of literary systems. The revisions and expansions of Polysystem Theory reflect its adaptability and relevance in the context of contemporary translation studies. By incorporating perspectives on globalization, power dynamics, intermediality, and the evolving definition of translation, scholars have enriched the original framework, making it a robust tool for analyzing the complexities of cultural exchange in a globalized world. As translation continues to play a crucial role in shaping cultural narratives, the ongoing development of Polysystem Theory will remain essential for understanding the intricate dynamics of literature and translation.

Conclusion

The revisions to Polysystem Theory underscore its continued relevance in the fields of translation studies and cultural analysis. By expanding its original scope to address issues of globalization, power dynamics, and cross-cultural interactions, the theory offers a flexible framework for understanding the complex and evolving role of translation within literary systems. Translation is not merely a derivative or secondary activity; it serves as a mediator and an active agent of innovation that can reshape the literary and cultural hierarchies of the target system. Polysystem Theory's recognition of translation as central to the literary system, particularly during periods of cultural flux or when the target system is in need of renewal, highlights the dynamic nature of translated texts. These texts can introduce new genres, forms, and perspectives that challenge existing norms and open up new avenues for cultural expression. In this revised context, the translator is not simply a linguistic mediator but a cultural agent who contributes to the circulation and transformation of ideas. The

adaptability of Polysystem Theory to contemporary cultural and literary trends reaffirms its value as a theoretical tool for examining translation within a broader socio-cultural framework. As global interconnectedness continues to intensify, the theory's insights into the positioning of translated literature within fluctuating systems of power, ideology, and culture become increasingly significant. Thus, Polysystem Theory remains an essential model for analyzing how translations not only reflect but actively shape the dynamics of literary and cultural systems across the world.

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