

## THE ROLE OF TRANSLATIONS IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE. CONJECTURES AND SOLUTIONS

■ Cătălin Constantinescu  
■ ‘Alexandru Ioan Cuza’ University of Iași  
■ Romania

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that the general theory of literature is not possible if we avoid the conclusions offered by the comparative literary studies that take into consideration the important role that translations play in the broader literary phenomenon. The insertion of the national literatures into a polysystem cannot be imagined without literary translations (Itamar Even-Zohar developed his theory in parallel and simultaneously with the descriptive paradigm in translations). The polysystem theory favoured the issue of translations in the field of literary studies, since it was conceived – when literary studies were ignoring the translations – as a theory that describes how literatures evolve. This theory legitimated the literary translations as part of the literary study (Susan Bassnett strongly advocated this idea). It is stated that systems (literatures national are perfect examples) exist only in systems theory, without an ontological status; the decision to consider literature, art or translation as a system is based on the assumption that such an approach clarifies the internal structure and the evolution of literature, and also its connections with the outside world. We may observe that all modern national literatures participate more or less in a literary polysystem, influencing writers, giving them models to imitate or influences to which they are opposing. ‘Peripheral literatures’ are highly shaped by translations. In recent years, many theorists (such as Emily Apter, Pascale Casanova, Rita Felski, Theo Hermans or David Damrosch) advocated the idea of defining world literature as a way of circulation of texts and readings made possible due to the translations and not as canonical literary texts. We anticipate that the current definition of (world) literature – the essential object of the general theory of literature – involves the description of it as a space between the source and receiving cultures, as a result of the translations.

KEYWORDS

translation, national literature, polysystem, comparative literary studies, general theory of literature.

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One of the most consistent part of the literary comparativism and of the comparative literary theory is the quest of answering some harrowing questions: ‘What literary works should read one in order to understand what is World Literature?’ or ‘How many books can read one in his or her lifetime and in how many languages?’. Answering may indicate the role of the translations in the general theory of literature. Literary comparativism, throughout its history, is deeply connected with the phenomenon of translations, a necessary part in understanding the influences, the intersections between literatures written in vernacular languages or the intersections between different arts.

Commonly, translation means several ways of transfer: translation of content in different linguistic codes, in different artistic codes, etc. Translation studies are interested in resolving problems which may be expressed as questions: ‘How can we speak about a ‘single language’ and how may we distinguish and analyse historical and cultural stratifications from the texts we read and translate?’; ‘How do we study oral and written translations, and the cultural and linguistic functions of them?’; ‘What is the role of translations in the religious, ethical or political structures of the past?’; ‘How were translations used to undermine the power structures?’; ‘What was precisely the role of translations in colonial and postcolonial societies?’; ‘What is the meaning of translations in identity’s construction?’

The comparative study of literature must observe the special role of the translations; the term *translation* is increasingly used as *transformation*, through the literary texts that make translation as their main theme or through the work of translators, as they rewrite the sources and may alter the horizon of expectations. Moreover, the comparatist may have special and refined answers, as he or she is concerned with problems such as: for the representation of the Other, in the globalized world, translations are very important; how severe the inequalities between various languages are, as some of them are more important than others; the current meaning of the ethics of translation. The main gain of studying the role of translation is that we may observe that ‘national’ literary histories are actually ‘transnational’ literary histories. This idea may be better understood in the context of the polysystem theory.

Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere were interested in translation studies since they were interested in linguistic and cultural differences. The theory of translations would be incomplete if it had no practical starting point, and if the accessibility of ideas is not regarded as a bridge between those who define themselves as theoreticians of translations and those who define themselves as simple translators. Bassnett and Lefevere considered the study of intimate translations related to comparative literature and inseparable connected to history. The conjecture is revolutionary: the study of translations should be the field within which comparative literature is located, not the other way around. (Bassnett, Lefevere, 1998: p. viii)

Bassnett and Lefevere somehow shift the emphasis from the practice of translation to cultural studies, showing that there are cultural manipulations generated by those in power (an idea borrowed from Edwin Gentzler). The study of translations would be the study of cultural interaction; we can study mediation between cultures through words, forms, cultural nuances and the meanings existing in the cultures in contact.

We must mention that Lefevere challenged the study of translations in the field of comparative literature or linguistics in 1976, regarding it as a particular discipline. Later, Susan Bassnett chose in the volume *Translation Studies* to develop an entire theoretical apparatus which supports the idea that translation studies represent an independent field that focuses on cultural contexts. Hence, a careful concern for understanding the complexity of manipulating texts and the factors that have influenced translators' translation strategies (Bassnett, 2004: 32).

The idea of 'translation as rewriting' struck Lefevere in 1981, when he introduced the concept of 'refracted text' – a text that was processed for a particular audience or adapted to a certain poetics or ideology. 'Refraction' meant for Lefevere the adaptation of a literary work to a different audience, in order to influence the way audience reads the work. In 1984, Lefevere imposed a new term: 'refraction' became 're-writing'. And 'rewriting' meant any text produced on the basis of another, intended as adaptation of the other text to a certain ideology or certain poetics, or both at times. Consequently, according to Lefevere and Bassnett (2004), 'rewriting' reflects a certain ideology and aesthetics, and directs literature to a certain function in a particular society. Rewriting is a manipulation in the service of power, but it is a manipulation that can develop new concepts, genres, literary innovations. Translation is not just a linguistic matter, but involves factors like power, ideology, aesthetics, and patronage.

In the early 1980s, Lefevere approached Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, which he later criticized, proposing new terms and categories, such as patronage, ideology, poetics, and the 'universe of discourse'. All these

categories are related to the complex phenomenon of translation, which is directly influenced by authority, legitimacy and power. Therefore, the study of translations should take into account the power, patronage, ideology and poetics, placing a special emphasis on attempts to undermine an ideology or poetics.

Following the suggestion of Richard Johnson, in the 1970s and 1980s, Itamar Even-Zohar developed a very complex theory of polysystems, under the influence of Russian formalism (Tinianov, Eichenbaum and Zhirmunskij). And, after Bahtin and Lotman, Even-Zohar insists on the fact that a special interest must be taken in the mechanisms of the relationship between what we call the 'high' literature and the 'low' literature. The above distinction was one of the main targets of cultural studies. Any literary study that ignores works condemned to have no artistic value will only give an inaccurate image of the process of production and reception of literature.

Just as Itamar Even-Zohar has been theorized since 1973, all modern national literatures are more or less involved in a literary 'polysystem', which influences the writers by offering models imitated or not, or influences to which they are opposing. Peripheral literature is modelled in a great deal by translations.

Even-Zohar proposed that any study of literary history be at the same time a study of the history of translation. The number of translations produced at a given time varies according to the stage of development of the respective culture; therefore, the cultures in transition tend to translate several texts as they consolidate, while those who consider themselves self-sufficient tend to translate less.

In 1976, Even-Zohar proposed the approach of translation through his notion of systematic literary study, attempting to open a new opening for translations. It also raised the issue of the correlations between the translated work and the target system (target culture); also, the problem of choosing certain texts to be translated at a given time, and the way in which translations can adopt specific behaviours and rules. It is not always the aesthetic factor that is decisive, emphasized Even-Zohar. Even-Zohar was interested in some other aspects: what could be the dynamics – within a literary system – between innovation and conservatism, and what role could the translated literature play in this regard? Could translation be a major force in evolution, producing transformations? Such a notion of translation as a tool of literary renewal proved to be radical at that time, one that traditional literary historians tried to minimize. Even-Zohar has identified such a trend in Renaissance: with the rise of vernacular languages to an equal status to classical languages, there has been an increasing activity in the field of

translation (without being a marginal concern). The translations must be seen as the basis of the process of transformation of the literary forms related to the emergence of vernacular cultures. For this reason, Even-Zohar proposed a systematic study of the conditions that made possible for translations to take place in a particular culture. Although in controversial terms, his proposal enumerated several concrete situations: 1) when the literature is 'young', in the process of edification, when the polysystem is not shaped; 2) when the literature is 'peripheral', 'weak'; 3) in moments of crisis.

The main criticism to the polysystem theory was the idea of shifting the attention from the source text and context to the target system (target language). This mutation is explained by Susan Bassnett by the intent that underpinned the theory of the polysystem: to move away from the notion of a dominant literary canon and to emphasize the uncontrollable variables of a text in the target context. It is a theme that it shares with cultural studies, which have challenged the idea of studying canonical texts, proposing the widening of the spectrum of the study by including what is popular among the masses. Another point of criticism regarding the polysystem theory: the study of translations in Canada, India, or Latin America did not adopt the polysystem, but rather analyzed the texts translated from the perspective of relations between colonized and colonizers.

For Even-Zohar, the challenge was to find the answer to questions such as: 'What is the function of the translated literature in the context of literature as a whole?'; 'Can we think translated literature as a system?'; 'Are the cultural or verbal relationships – within an arbitrary set of translated – texts of the same type as those in the original literature?'; 'What kind of relationships can exist between the translated works, presented as definitive 'products', imported from other literature and detached from their contexts and consequently neutralized from the point of view of the centre-periphery axis?'

The translated works can correlate in two ways:

- 1) depending on how the source texts are selected by the target literature, the principles of selection being impossible to correlate with the host co-systems of the target literature;
- 2) depending on how they adopt specific rules, behaviours and policies, that is, how they are used by the literary repertoire. (Even-Zohar, 1990: 46)

Translated literature may have its own repertoire, which up to a certain level may be exclusive.

According to Even-Zohar, translations are not only an integral part of a literary polysystem, but they are also the most active inner system. It remains to be determined what the position of the translations within the polysystem

is, and how this position is related to the general repertoire. We would be tempted, at first glance, to deduce it from the peripheral position of translations in literary studies (with the amendment that today the situation improved).

Asserting that translations remain central to polysystem theory is to say that they actively participate in shaping the centre of a polysystem. In this case, they are a part of the innovative forces; when new literary models are born, translations are probably among the means of developing a new repertoire, introducing foreign works and models into a literature. The translations produce not only new models of reality that replace the old ones, but also a new poetic language or techniques and patterns of composition. It seems clear that the underlying principles in the process of the selection of the works to be translated are determined by the situation that governs the host polysystem: the texts are chosen in accordance with their compatibility with the new approaches and the supposed innovative role they can assume in target literature.

But not all polysystems are structured in the same way, and the cultures differ significantly. French literature would be an example of a more rigid system compared to others. Combined with the traditional central position of French literature in the European context (or within the European macro-polysystem), it would lead to a peripheral position of translations from French literature. At least for some periods, the observation is not valid: Romanian literature, for example, admits translations from French as having a central position in the first part of the 20th century.

The answer to the question ‘What do we translate?’ cannot be located outside a historical and ideal context: it is determined by the basis of the operations that govern the polysystem. Seen from this point of view, the translation is no longer a phenomenon with fixed nature and boundaries, but an activity dependent on relations within a particular cultural system. So the recent definitions of translation as a related phenomenon formulated by Pascale Casanova or David Damrosch are highly influenced by the structuralist perspective of Itamar Even-Zohar.

The polysystem theory has the advantage of capturing the dynamic nature of literature, thanks to the practice of continuous repositioning of the genres related to each other. It illustrates that canonical literature is good to be subject to competition.

Translated literature does not occupy a fixed position in a literary system because the system itself is in a continuous state of alteration, so Even-Zohar considers that this state is the normal position of the translation. The polysystem theory is important because it has moved the literary research

from the linguistic approach of translating to a broader approach, in a cultural, social and historical context. The main counter-argument to the theory of the polysystem remains the far too abstract nature of the theory elaborated by Itamar Even-Zohar.

It is, however, mandatory to mention the answer that Itamar Even-Zohar formulated in 2005 in the article 'Polysystem Theory (Revised)' in defending the theory of the polysystem. The original term 'polysystem' refers to phenomena existing at different levels, so that the polysystem of a particular national literature is considered to be part of a wider socio-cultural polysystem which itself may contain several other polysystems (beyond the literary), such as artistic, religious or political. In this context, literature is a term that can designate not only a series, a multitude, a collection of texts, but a wider phenomenon such as a set of factors governing the production, promotion and reception of these texts. In this way, Even-Zohar redefines the polysystem: a multiple system, a system with different systems that interfere with each other and partially overlap, and still function as a structured whole. (Even-Zohar, 2005: 40)

As far as the literary polysystem is concerned, there is a tension between the centre and the periphery, where different literary genres struggle to occupy the dominant position of the centre. The implication is that translated literature also exists as part of the polysystem of a national literature, since translation is no longer a phenomenon whose nature and boundaries are definitive, fixed, but an activity dependent on the relationship in a particular cultural system. (Even-Zohar, 1990: 51)

It has to be said that AILC/ICLA had in 1976, 1978 and 1980 conferences and meetings that debated the subject of translation of literature. We even recall the volume in Theo Hermans' co-ordination, *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, where the results of many of these debates are found.

Also, in 1985, José Lambert and Hendrik van Gorp (in the chapter *On Describing Translation*, pp. 42-53) proposed a scheme to compare the theory of the system and the theory of translation and the relations between the author, the text and the reader, as follows:

- 1) *Preliminary data*, which includes information about the title, preface and other paratextual information (about translation);
- 2) *The macro level*, with reference to the way the text, chapters, title are structured;
- 3) *The micro level*, investigating linguistic transfers or linguistic deviations;

4) *The systemic context*, which involves a comparison of micro and macro levels, of text and theory, leading to the identification of the norms.

In the past, the study of translations was conducted in the context of the study of influences, genetic relations between literatures and writers, while the emphasis was always put on the original work. Even in studying the migration of themes and motives (the study of themes is a consistent chapter of comparative literature), the translators were considered intermediaries who transmit messages from one national literature to another.

The new paradigm for the study of literary translations was to be based on a comprehensive theory and practical research. The theorists who have engaged in the foundation of this new direction shared in the first place the common ground, as they shared a common vision of literature: as a dynamic and complex system. And the belief that there should be an interplay between theoretical models and case studies. They also approached the literary translation from a descriptive point of view (and this is an essential, obligatory praxis in any theory), pragmatic, functional and systematic. An interest was noticed in the rules and the constraints governing the production and reception of translations, the relationship between translation and other types of word processing, and the place and the role of translations both in literature and in the interaction of the literatures. The line of influences in this new direction begins with the Russian formalists (Tinianov, Jakobson), the Czech structuralists (Mukarovsky, Vodicka), then with Iuri Lotman, Claudio Guillén, Siegfried Schmidt, Itamar Even-Zohar. As David Damrosch observed, the translations played a formative role in creating national literature. Not even one of the individual literatures was created from zero, but was born in a wider, transnational context.

With the rise of nation-states in recent centuries, national traditions have developed in an international context, in a context in which the respective nation's writers defined themselves in terms of translations assimilated by literatures with whom they came into contact or of which they were part.

In modern times – the term ‘national literatures’ is used in the true sense of the word – translations played a vital role, not necessarily as external sources of inspiration, but as constituent, if not all, of most parts of the national literature. David Damrosch analysed the circuits through which authors such as Bartolome de las Casas, Nguyen Du or Marguerite Yourcenar and translations of their writings have marked other national literatures. We can therefore speak of an international character that is regularly found in national literary cultures. Such cases illustrate that ‘national’ and ‘international’ are no longer opposing categories. The ‘national language’ itself is the environment through which original works and translated works

circulate together and form our national literatures that are ineluctably inertial. For Damrosch, translation can improve the original text, allowing readers to access several cultural worlds. The idea of world literature takes into account those forms of literature that gain in translation, having in mind that other works lose power or influence in another language.

Emily Apter adopts Alain Badiou's idea of untranslatability, recognizing the limits of the cultural translation: 'nothing is translatable'. Though, the translation zone is established on the basis of the philological relation. Not surprisingly, as the singularity is the reason for a poetic masterpiece to become the paradigm-shift agent or a carrier of universal value. Apter insists that 'the challenge of the comparative literature is to balance the singularity of untranslatable alterity against the need to translate *quand même*'. (Apter, 2006: 91)

The implications of a planetary criticism, for the future of comparative literature, as suggested by Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and then by Emily Apter, for the future of comparative literature are based on the emphasis 'on a unidimensional formalism – univocity, singularity, irreducibility, holism, quantum cosmology, the Event – while remaining constant to an earthly politics of translation and nontranslability'. (Apter, 2006: 93)

Making a step further, Apter affirms that the field of the translation studies explores the possibility that everything is translatable, having in mind that it should expand to include the relationship between natural language and code (informatics is integrated in interdisciplinary humanities. (Apter, 2006: 227). Also, the shifts in the world canon and literary markets may determine the repositioning of the translation as the fulcrum of the comparative literature. Apter reiterates the idea of 'neighbouring' from Kenneth Reinhard: comparative literature is not only comparison, but a mode of reading texts that are grouped not in 'families' (similarity and difference), but into 'neighbourhoods' (accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation and ethical encounter). (Apter, 2006: 247)

For Emily Apter, translation functions as a form of social homogenization that flattens out the cultural and linguistic differences, backed by the socio-economic logic of globalization. As incentive for comparative literary studies, Apter proposes the concept of untranslatability, in order to resist false equivalence, emphasizing the critical force of 'incomparability and untranslatability'. This description of the phenomenon is based on the idea that comparison and the perception of inequality are intrinsically connected, and that comparative thinking could be used to impose pre-existing categories or to impose one's view over the world (the label could be 'colonialism').

Rita Felski proposes a return to actor-network theory (ANT) in discussing the role of the translation in contemporary literary comparativism and its new angles for the explorations of translation and comparison. ANT, as theorized by Bruno Latour, is a form of relational thinking, centred around the idea of actor – that is anything that makes a difference, related to agency, not to performance or presence. ANT is not so much interested in the linguistic turn (as the most of the translation studies), but in making things more real rather than less real, in terms of Latour and Felski. What ANT brings to literary studies are the new ways of thinking about connectivity, seeing the relation as co-creation. ANT and comparative literature are interested in translation, ANT being described as a ‘sociology of translation’.

Translation is rather a metaphor for ‘thinking about relations’ (Felski), as ANT implies that ‘meanings are mediated, altered, and sometimes enriched’, when they move from one culture to other culture. Comparative literary studies may benefit from new modes of comparison: ‘ones that can attend to cross-fertilizations between minor literatures that are not scripted by the centre; that are alive to the contingencies of cross-cultural interaction and lateral networks; that do not assume that translation is equivalent to homogenization’. (Felski, 2016: 753) ANT reveals that the translability is a reality, as it is an ongoing basis of mediation and communication between actors.

For Rita Felski, ‘tracing hybrid and heterogeneous constellations of text, persons and things’ becomes more challenging in the new context of comparative literature, where texts and contexts are no more the only points of interests: ‘This openness to the kinds of actors that make literature matter is, in my view, one of the most exciting contributions of ANT to literary studies’ (Felski, 2016: 762).

Comparison is thought to defamiliarize what one takes as given in a certain culture, and also plays the main role in decontextualization and recontextualization. The relativization of the force of belonging characterizes also the comparison.

The work of Pascale Casanova *The World Republic of Letters* (1999, 2004) also deals with the importance of works on the periphery in the revitalization of French urban literature (metropolitan French literature). Casanova’s perspective is influenced by that of Goethe, who in 1820 identified the importance of international circulation, made possible through translations: the key to rebirth of any national culture. And in 1836, Goethe stated that he preferred to read his own Faust in French translation, not in German (in *Kunst und Alterthum*, 1836, 1984: 276, *apud* Damrosch, 350). It follows that a translation implies a new, fresh language.

According to Pascale Casanova translation is one of the most special ways of consecration in the literary world, as it is the main vehicle to enter the literary world for all authors located on the periphery of a center. (Casanova, 2004: 133)

Translation is an instrument whose purposes and uses vary according to the position of the translator to the translated text (the old source language axis – target language). Therefore, any theoretical analysis or attempt must take into account two factors: the intention of the translator or the author and the relationship between the languages involved.

For a poorer, peripheral target language, the import of major literary works seems particularly important, and the translation is a way of gathering literary resources, acquiring universal texts, and thus represents a very consistent way of enriching an expanding literature. Casanova offers as an example the case of the German romantics, who have made remarkable efforts to translate the classics into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another direction of enriching a language is the translation of subversive works by authors who themselves are polyglots and enjoy recognition international: Nabokov translates Lewis Carroll into Russian, Borges translates Hart Crane, e e cummings, Robert Penn Warren and so on (Casanova, 2004: 134).

This way, instead of turning the periphery into a centre to consecrate it, they made the centre known in the periphery by translating its major works. The translation also allows the international distribution of literary capital by expanding the power and prestige of literatures of long tradition.

From the point of view of the target language, the import of literary texts written in ‘small’ or neglected languages functions as a means of annexing or misappropriating peripheral texts. For a minor language, it is equivalent to obtaining a validation certificate, and comparatists should be interested in this form of consecration.

Translation is not just a form of naturalization (in the sense of changing one’s nationality in exchange for another) or a simple passage from one language to another: translation is *littérisation*. Casanova believes that Latin American authors began to exist in international literature only after their translation into French and their recognition by French critics. For this reason, it is stated that Jorge Luis Borges is an invention of France. Danilo Kis’ international recognition coincided with his consecration in French. And Rabindranath Tagore, once translated into English. (Casanova, 2004: 135)

The definition of the translation as *littérisation*, a change in literary existence, makes it possible to find a solution for a whole series of problems generated by faith in equality (or better said in symmetry) of different types of translation, conceived as simple transfers of meaning from one language to

another. In fact, we are dealing with a transformation into a literary language (in the sense of the language of literature, C.C.). For Casanova, *littérisation* is an operation like any other – self-translation, translation, transcription, direct composition in a dominant language, by some means by which a country with underdeveloped literature can obtain literary recognition from legitimate authorities. Transmutation and translation of literary texts are strategies to help literature to become visible for all.

In ‘Introduction’ of *Translating Others*, Theo Hermans insists and asserts that the translation negotiates the difference. The bigger the difference, the harder the translation is. And the difference has many masks, which is the reason why the study of translations follows the same logic. From a historical point of view, the study of translations in the West owes its categories to the particular concepts of language and culture, in combination with a limited set of canonical written texts. Such alliances explain the traditional concern for identity and preservation. This history, however, gave to the translation studies a limited basis for confronting the complexities and inequities of a globalizing world.

According to Hermans, ‘translating others’ is a phrase that refers not only to alterity and how it affects translation, but also to the many ‘Others’ who translate in their own way, for various and specific purposes.

The intake of the local and its specificity is not possible through a single model of investigation. Rather we can accept that we are dealing with a perspective of a disparate future of discipline, de-centred and ex-central, which has to learn several languages. The methods of the future will be rather dialogical than dialectical. The commitment in order to exploit the contextual details of the difference confines the researcher to pay close attention to his discourse. The future methods certainly involve critical self-reflection. Beyond the (im)precision of the proposed models and the elaborated theories, it is certain that the study of translations from a literary perspective still remains a territory of speculation. Some are more or less convincing.

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