



## Revisiting The Polysystem Theory in Translating Literature For Children

### KEYWORDS

children's literature, translation theories, polysystem, adaptation

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**ABSTRACT** *Out of the multitude of translation theories, some are more likely to be applied to children's literature translation especially under the present circumstances which oscillate between globalizing and anti-globalizing approaches to translation. The international success of contemporary series for teenagers and the modern phenomenon of crossover fiction have started to operate changes at the level of children's literature status in the sense that it is no longer placed at the periphery of the mainstream adult system and consequently its translation has witnessed an unprecedented growth both quantitatively and qualitatively.*

*This paper aims at viewing literature for children in the light of the polysystem theory from the point of view of its impact and topicality in the current translation process.*

### INTRODUCTION

In a plea for Children's Literature Translation (CLT) to lose its marginal position in the translation polysystem, this paper traces some important guidelines in terms of the polysystem and skopos theories in the specific case of Children's Literature (CL). Unity and translation guidelines are imperiously needed especially since CL is a heterogeneous field ranging from picture books to novels for teenagers, covering various types of discourse and addressing readers of different ages and with various interests and preferences.

### THE IMPACT OF THE POLYSYSTEM THEORY UPON CLT

Developed by Even-Zohar in the 1970s, the Polysystem theory relied upon "high" literature while overlooking the importance of literary systems or genres such as children's literature, thrillers and the whole system of translated literature. Even-Zohar (1978 : 118) focuses upon the fact that translated literature operates as a polysystem defined as "a heterogeneous, hierarchised conglomerate (or system) of systems which interact to bring about an ongoing, dynamic process of evolution within the polysystem as a whole" (Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997 : 176). When translated literature occupies a primary position, it can change the centre of the polysystem determining new orientations in Translation Studies (TS): "Often, leading writers produce the most important translations and translations are a leading factor in the formation of new models for the target culture (TC), introducing new poetics, techniques and so on" (Munday, 2001 : 110). As an illustration, in the current field of literature for children in Romania, the market is over-saturated with massive translations from authors of Anglo-American expression. This phenomenon has two major consequences: the demand for fast translations is on the increase and the original voices of the Romanian writers for children are being suffocated and sometimes influenced by the fashionable models of the Western world, be they valuable or not.

Translated literature may occupy the primary position when a "young" literature is being established and looks initially to "older" literatures for ready-made models; when a literature is "peripheral" or "weak" and imports those literary

types which it is lacking or when there is a critical turning point in literary history at which established models are no longer considered sufficient. For Thomson-Wohlge-muth, the second case reflects "the situation in smaller nations" whose "resources are limited" and "their literary tradition is weak" (1998 : 100). She considers that the outcome would be a peripheral position within the hierarchy of European literatures. Moreover, in these countries translated literature would become the main source of innovation.

If when she refers to limited resources Thomson-Wohlge-muth has in mind the economic resources then she is right in assuming that this would be a reason for the peripheral position in the literary polysystem when it comes to literary tradition and to translated literature as the main source of innovation. The example of the Romanian literature is eloquent in this respect. In the 1840s there was a true invasion of translated literature in Romania and Kog Iniceanu, one of the Romanian leading figures of the literary movement of the time warned Romanian writers against the danger of translating mediocre works of foreign writers to the detriment of their national productions. In his opinion, original autochthon literary works should exceed the number of translated books.

A long tradition of valuable Romanian literary productions both in adult literature and in children's literature proved that Kog Iniceanu was right. Unfortunately, statistics in contemporary Romanian literature for children are again in favour of translations, especially from writers of English expression. Comparative analysis shows that Kog Iniceanu's warning in the 1840s holds valid today when translated literature threatens to suffocate original Romanian productions of literary works for children.

On the other hand, translated literature might assume a secondary position and in this situation it represents a peripheral system within the polysystem, it has no major influence over the central system and even becomes a conservative element, preserving conventional forms and conforming to the literary norms of the target system. Even-Zohar (1978 : 196) points out that this secondary position is the "normal" one for translated literatures. How-

ever, translated literature itself is stratified (ibidem: 195). Some translated literature may be secondary while others, translated from major source literatures, are primary. On the contemporary Romanian book market for children, translations from the Anglo-American environment occupy a primary position; such is the case of highly successful series for children and teenagers: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (2005-2010) or Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2008), rapidly translated and made available to the Romanian target audience.

In addition, Even-Zohar (ibidem: 196-7) suggests that the position occupied by translated literature in the polysystem conditions the translation strategy. If it is primary, translators do not feel constrained to follow target literature models and are more prepared to break conventions. They thus often produce a target text (TT) that is a close match in terms of adequacy, reproducing the textual relations of the source text (ST). This in itself may then lead to new source language (SL) models. If translated literature is secondary, translators tend to use existing TC models for the TT and produce more "non-adequate" translations (ibidem: 197).

Even-Zohar's polysystem theory has been easily extended and applied to the translation of children's literature. Only the fact that children's literature and translated children's literature have been integrated in the literary system as a whole is an important step forward for CLTS.

To emphasize the importance of the polysystem theory, Carta mentions the fact that this theory "has provided useful instruments to look into the reception of both original and translated children's books in the target literary system and to understand its influence on a wider socio-cultural context" (2008: 38).

Irrespective of its primary or peripheral position, translated literature for children preserves its dynamic character requiring a continuous adjustment of the translation strategies in accordance with its integration in the literary polysystem. In addition to Even-Zohar's observations, Shavit (1986 : 112) expresses her wish to examine the implications of the systemic status of children's literature upon the translation of children's literature. She considers that the systemic affiliation of a text entering the children's system "is very similar to that of a text entering another peripheral system – the non-canonised system for adults" (ibid.: 114). The model transferred from adult literature to children's

literature functions initially as a primary model. Once accepted by the canonised children's system, the model enters the non-canonised children's literature and is perhaps reduced and simplified.

According to Shavit (1986, 1981), the low and marginal status of children's literature and its development out of non-canonised adult literature have influenced the translation practices of drastic change and adaptation of the ST.

On the contrary, Tabbert (2002) questions the low status of children's literature and argues that in the case of former East Germany "the overall status of children's literature was higher, due to its ability to function as a form of social criticism" (256). The situation described by Tabbert was in fact similar in other totalitarian regimes. Another critic of the polysystem theory, O'Sullivan (2000 : 134-147) challenges the universal nature of Shavit's idea of the development of children's literature and provides two examples of children's literary systems (one in Africa and one in Ireland) which show different developmental patterns from Shavit's model. She also suggests that the internal stratification of the fields according to differential status may equally play a role in determining the degree of change in translations of literature for children and contends that there is some evidence that low status texts are adapted more than high status texts (ibidem: 236-237). She is in favour of a functional theory for the translation of children's literature which takes into account these differences in status and type of text (ibidem: 190-191).

To sum up, the translation of children's literature might relate the text to existing models in the target system or might change the original text in order to adjust it to a model existing in the target system. For example, there are 10 Romanian translation variants of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* ranging from 1971 to 2012 and worth discussing in terms of the employed translation strategies, the reasons behind the translation choices and the translator's power to influence the reader's perception of a literary text. The merit of the polysystem theorists is to have shown that translation represents a creative process which involves the original adaptation of the ST to the TC.

## CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary translators for children need to take into consideration the different variables at work during the actual translation process. The use of specific translation theories is meant to establish some recurrent features of CLT with the aim of providing a coherent translation model meant to help translators in their activity. From this perspective, the impact of the polysystem theory is visible in the degree of adaptation of translated children's books in the light of a functionalist interactive model.

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