

# CULTURE RESEARCH IN THE RECENT WORK OF ITAMAR EVEN-ZOHAR

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*Abstract: Even-Zohar is highly regarded among scholars of Translation Studies for his theoretical contributions in the area of "Polysystem Theory". This paper presents an introduction to Even-Zohar's more recent work in the area of "culture research" (which he distinguishes from Cultural Studies). It locates his thinking within a framework deriving from Russian Formalism and, more recently, Russian Semiotics. The major focus in his Papers in Culture Research (2004/2005) is on culture as a socio-semiotic system, allowing for both reflection and action. A significant term in discussing systems is "repertoire", the rules and materials which govern the production and use of given cultural objects. Even-Zohar's papers seek to place repertoire within a broader framework, and to allow for the invention and transfer of repertoires between various social groups. The work of idea-makers is particularly important in this transfer. The paper concludes with a consideration of the relevance of "culture research" to Translation Studies. It suggests that his ideas are of limited use but may provide the basis for further reflection on the roles of translators and translations, especially in new nation states.*

*Key words: translation, Itamar-Zohar, culture research*

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## ITAMAR EVEN-ZOHAR

Itamar Even-Zohar is recognised as a major contributor to the development of Translation Theory during the so-called “cultural turn” of that theoretical field during the 1970s. He was born in Tel Aviv in 1939, and educated at the universities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. He is currently Professor of Culture Research and Porter Chair of Semiotics and Literary Theory, Tel Aviv University, having previously been Bernstein Chair Professor of Translation Theory (1973-1982) and Artzt Chair Professor the History of Literature (1982-1990). His major collections of works so far are *Papers in Historical Poetics* (PHP, 1978); *Polysystems Studies* (PS, 1990); and *Papers in Culture Research* (PCR, 2004/2005).

Even-Zohar’s “Short Biographical Description” prepared for the Unit for Culture Research, Tel Aviv University in 2003, stated:

His current main field is culture research. His main work has been developing polysystem theory, designed to deal with dynamics and heterogeneity in culture. His field work has concentrated on interactions between various cultures, and viewed them from the perspective of the making of cultures, especially of large entities (such as “nations”). He has been engaged in recent years in working on the planning of culture and its relation to the making of such large entities. In earlier stages of his work he contributed to developing a polysystemic theory of translation, i.e., designed to account for translation as a complex and dynamic activity governed by system relations rather than by a-priori fixed parameters of comparative language capabilities. This has subsequently led to studies on literary interference, eventually analysed in terms of intercultural relations.

The main aim of this paper is to outline Even-Zohar’s thinking on “culture”, as presented in the recent *Papers in Culture Research*. One clarification is necessary before we advance. As Even-Zohar has stated in an interview with Dora Sales Salvador (2002):

“Culture Research” is not identical with “Cultural Studies” because large parts of the latter are interested only in “the arts” and because they are often biased towards “lower strata” as an expression of protest against “the establishment”. In Culture Research we attempt to avoid falling into the pitfalls of

either “popular is authentic and true” or “popular is the degeneration of high values”.

## “CULTURE”

There have been at least three separate ways of thinking about “culture” in the English intellectual tradition. The first is suggested by Matthew Arnold's definition in *Culture and Anarchy* (1960: 6) that culture is “the best which has been thought and said in the world”. This concept has led to the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ cultures, and an appreciation and preference for the former because of its aesthetic, intellectual and moral superiority.

A second standard, and equally old, definition is that of the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor. In his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, Tylor wrote: “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Schusky and Culbert 1978: 5).

The second definition emphasises that culture is learned, complex, inter-related, and shared by all of the members of a society. It is the definition preferred by the social sciences. We may see its ongoing influence in the 1960s anthropological textbook *Other Cultures*, by John Beattie (1964), which includes these chapter headings: Kinship, Marriage and Affinity, Social Control: Political Organization, Social Control: Law and Social Relations, Economic and Property Relations, The Field of Ritual: Magic, The Field of Ritual: Religion, Social Change, Conclusion and Assessment.

Beattie recognised the role of language in the formulation of culture. He suggested that: “a people's categories of thought and the forms of their language are inextricably bound together” (Beattie 1964: 31). Another way of understanding this is expressed by Juliane House: “language is so embedded in culture such that the meaning of any linguistic item can be properly understood only with reference to the cultural context enveloping it” (House 2002: 92).

A third and subsequent view, strongly grounded in the functions of language, has been the theory that social life is “a world of symbolic connections” (Pouwer 1968: 6). Ann Swidler’s paper, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies”, greatly admired by Even-Zohar, noted the current acceptance by anthropologists of the argument that culture is composed of “the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning” (1986: 273).

### **RUSSIAN FORMALISM, PRAGUE STRUCTURALISM**

This interest in language and symbolisation comes closest to Even-Zohar’s thinking about “culture”. Nevertheless, we must recognise that his own thinking has been overwhelmingly shaped by a completely different tradition: the work of the Russian Formalists of the 1920s, their successors the Prague structuralists, and the more recent Russian interest in Semiotics. These movements provided the foundation for the teaching of the Department of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University, where Even-Zohar studied and in which he continues to teach.

Language was central to Formalist definitions of literature and their successors, the Prague Linguistic Circle, further formulated Formalist literary theories within a purely linguistic framework. This framework was derived from, or at least very similar to, the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, de Saussure argued that “languages are systems, constituted by signs that are *arbitrary* and *differential*” (Robey 1982: 39).

The Prague Circle was founded in 1926 by Roman Jakobson, after he moved to Czechoslovakia; Jakobson had also been the first chairman of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The Prague School’s emphasis on structures, as an alternative way of defining de Saussure’s concept of relationships, led to it being described as “structuralist”. They argued that, like language, the poetic work too is a “‘functional structure’... the different elements of which cannot be understood except in their connections with the whole” (Robey 1982: 44).

The Prague school applied these ideas of “structure” and “function” not only to literature but in fact to all forms of communication. In an address

delivered in America in 1958 but based on categories propounded by Mukarovsky twenty years earlier, Jakobson suggested that any message can have six different functions. These correspond to the six factors present in any act of communication: an addresser, an addressee, a context, a code, a means of contact, and the message itself:

CONTEXT

ADDRESSER

MESSAGE

ADDRESSEE

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CONTACT

CODE

These functions work in the following way:

The focus on the *addresser*, for instance a speaker or an author, constitutes the emotive function, that of expressing the addresser's attitudes or feelings; the focus on the *addressee* or receiver, the *conative* function, that of influencing the feelings or attitudes of the addressee; the focus on the *context*, the real, external situation in which the message occurs, the *referential* function; the focus on the *code*, as when the message elucidates a point of grammar, the *metalingual* function; the focus on the means of contact, as in the case, say, of expressions inserted by one party into a telephone conversation simply in order to reassure the other party that they are both still on the line, the *phatic* function; the focus on the *message* itself, the poetic *function* (Robey 1982: 44-45).

While all functions may be present within any speech event, one will normally be dominant. This function will stand out beyond all the other functions in some obvious manner and will thus "foreground" or "actualise" the text as a whole (Robey 1982: 45).

Sometimes the message may be the most important thing about a text. At other times, the personality of the artist dominates everything else. On still other occasions, the means of expression may be the main feature of interest and the major distinguishing characteristic of the text. Acts of communication are also, therefore, both "hierarchical" (some are more important than others) and "dynamic" (constantly changing).

## RUSSIAN SEMIOTICS AND THE PAPERS IN CULTURE RESEARCH

Equally relevant for Even-Zohar's work on culture are more recent semiotic developments in Russian thought. Ann Shukman has written that, following the death of Stalin and the vacuum created in Soviet intellectual life by a lack of strict ideological control, Semiotics emerged in Russia as:

virtually the *only* voice to concern itself to concern itself with problems of culture and the theory of the arts. It then came to claim all fields of culture as its domain and hence cultural universals as its central topic (Shukman 1978: 190).

A new phase of the semiotics movement took place at Tartu University, under Yu. M. Lotman, who developed a "concentration on 'secondary modelling systems,' by which he meant those cultural systems (literature, the arts) which are 'secondary' in relation to language, which is held to be the 'primary' modelling system". Linguistics was "largely excluded from consideration" and the focus fell on "particular cultural systems (myth, ritual, religion, as well as folklore and the arts) rather than with cultural universals" (Shukman 1978: 190-1).

After 1970, Lotman moved towards a semiotic theory of culture. This too was not entirely a move away from his previous interest in literature. As Shukman states in her study of Lotman: "In these studies of culture, literature, if not the point of departure, was always at least the illustrative material" (Shukman 1977: 87). Later Shukman more emphatically points out that in Lotman's essays from the late 1960s: "He describes culture as the sum-total of all literary activity at a given epoch; it is not just a collection of 'great names' and isolated masterpieces" (Shukman 1977: 102, underlining added).

The concept of "culture" plays a limited role in Even-Zohar's early work. Its presence is most striking in the article "On Systematic Universals in Cultural History" (1977), collected in the *Papers in Historical Poetics*. Even-Zohar opens his discussion with a summary statement which may serve as a guiding thread to all that is to follow in his paper:

The overall conceptual framework which semiotics tried to provide for the sciences of man ... was always dominated by

the idea of human activity as an aggregate of sign systems carrying information, i.e., a system of systems necessarily correlated and functioning despite their heterogeneity as a structured whole (1978: 38).

Even-Zohar then continues with a quotation from a recent article by Yury Lotman and some of his colleagues, Uspenskij, Ivanov, Toporov and Pjatigorskij:

In the study of culture, the initial premise is that all human activity concerned with the processing, exchange, and storage of information possesses a certain unity. Individual sign systems, though they presuppose immanently organised structures, function only in unity, supported by one another. None of the sign systems possess a mechanism which would enable it to function culturally in isolation. Hence it follows that, together with an approach that permits us to construct a series of relatively autonomous sciences of the semiotic cycle, we shall admit another approach, according to which all of them examine particular aspects of the semiotics of culture, of the functional correlation of different sign systems (Lotman 1975: 57).

He then follows this up immediately with a further series of quotations from the same source, stating:

Consequently, the authors believe, 'culture is constructed as a hierarchy of semiotic systems' and "it is 'precisely [this] inner structure, the composition and correlation of particular semiotic subsystems, which determine the type of culture in the first place' (ibid 61). They admit that 'several cultures may also form a functional or structural unity' and that 'such an approach proves especially fruitful in solving problems of the comparative study of culture' (ibid.). Thus, 'culture' is considered the highest regulating principle of organised human activity, which, by means of its subsystems, manages to structure the world for human society (1978: 39).

This leads him to a second article by Lotman and Uspensky, from "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture" (1978), and the statement:

The main work of 'culture' [...] is the structural organisation of the surrounding world. Culture is a generator of 'structuredness' and it creates social sphere around man which, like biosphere,

makes life possible (in this case social and not organic). But in order to fulfil this role, culture must possess a structural 'stamping device'. This function is carried out by natural language. The language imparts an intuitive feeling of structure to all members of the community: by its evident systemic nature [...], by its transformation of an 'open' world of realia into a 'closed world of names, language makes people treat as structures even such phenomena the structural nature of which is, at least, not self-evident (1978: 39).

Even-Zohar concludes the first part of his paper, "On Systematic Universals in Cultural History", with the claim that the semiotic idea of culture is "capable of becoming a powerful working hypothesis, tightly linked with both language and literature in a concrete way" (underlining added), and that "we have little choice as whether or not to use it". Thus:

... even if our individual points of departure are language, literature, sociology, history, fashion or public traffic, we are likely to reach a point at which we cannot proceed satisfactorily unless we consider our specialised fields as both iso-structural and correlated with culture, that is both structuring it and structured by it (1978: 40).

In "The Making of Culture Repertoire and The Role of Transfer" (1997), in PCR (2005), Even-Zohar again uses these same quotations from Lotman. Here, however, he also makes reference to the article by the American anthropologist Ann Swidler cited above, to suggest that culture is "a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action'" (Swidler 1986: 273). The use of Swidler's 1986 article may suggest a shift away from literary models, which were characteristic of the early work of Lotman and of Even-Zohar himself. This need not necessarily be the case if we read Swidler with Even-Zohar's particular interests in mind. She has written:

culture consists of such symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life. These are the means through which 'social processes of sharing modes of behaviour and outlook within [a] community' (Hannerz, 1969: 184) take place (Swidler 1986: 273).



The words can be read as describing a broad range of patterned oral and written textual practices. They certainly should not necessarily be read as referring to those aspects of culture around which Beattie has written his book: kinship, marriage, political organisation, law, economics, magic and ritual, or social change. Even-Zohar's use of Swidler allows him to continue to work in broader but still essentially literary-like fields.

## PAPERS IN CULTURE RESEARCH

The semiotician of culture, Even-Zohar suggests, is interested in “the interaction between the material and semiotic processes in culture” (“Language and Culture Conflict, 2005: 140). In the second of the *Papers on Culture Research*, “Factors and Dependencies in Culture: A Revised System for Polysystem Culture Research” (originally published in 2000 and halved in PCR), Even-Zohar defines culture as “an overall system, a heterogeneous set of parameters, with the help of which human beings organise their life” (2005: 17). More precisely, culture is a socio-semiotic system, defined as “a sign-governed pattern of communication”, one of a number of such systems, some others being language and literature (“Polysystem Theory Revisited”, 2005: 42).

As the title to the first paper suggests, there are two major concepts of “culture”, “Culture as Goods, Culture as Tools”. Even-Zohar firstly describes what we might consider to be Matthew Arnold's view in terms of “culture-as-goods”. He suggests that this concept is characteristic of everyday use and of the humanistic traditions.

The possession of these goods – whether they be objects, ideas, activities or artifacts, “lapis lazuli, a high palace, running water, a car, a computer, or a set of texts ...” – signifies “wealth, high status, and prestige”. The “value” of these goods constantly changes, and it is the privileged who have most access to such goods and define their value in the first place, using such terms as “original”, “artistic”, “aesthetic”, “spiritual” and so forth. Those producers of cultural goods who have their products recognised as valuable gain the benefits and rewards known as “success”. (Here Even-Zohar pays tribute to the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, whom he also acknowledges in the Introduction to PS as “in some areas

superior ... to both Russian Formalism and later developments (including my own)", ("Culture as Goods, Culture as Tools", 2005: 3)).

The second concept, of "culture-as-tools", is characteristic of anthropology and sociology, but also of cultural semiotics. Here "culture is considered as a set of operating tools for the organization of life, on both the collective and individual levels". These tools are also of two types. "Passive tools" are "procedures with the help of which 'reality' is analyzed, explained and made sense of for and by humans". In this particular regard, he again cites Lotman's view that "the world" is "a set of signs which ... bombard us daily, and therefore need to be interpreted in order to make life possible".

Passive tools are about understanding. "Active tools", on the other hand, are about acting. They are "procedures with the help of which both an individual and a collective entity may handle any situation encountered, as well as produce any such situation" (summarising 2005: 7-10).

The distinction collapses in "Culture as Goods, Culture as Tools", when Even-Zohar insists that:

the 'culture-as-tools' conception is more useful and allows greater analytical and research versatility for developing research and understanding – and eventually also practical tools for policy-making – in the field of culture. Moreover, 'goods' can be fully investigated within the tools-framework, while the opposite is not true (2005: 10).

The key term for understanding both "passive" and "active" tools is "repertoire", which suggests that tools "are not a random pile of options, but a complex set, an array of interrelated components" (12). The term "repertoire" is drawn from Even-Zohar's redefinition of Jakobson's six functions of language, see above. In the second essay, "Factors and Dependencies in Culture: A Revised Outline for Polysystem Culture Research" (1997), Even-Zohar outlines these six as follows:

- a. The *repertoire* (code) is "the aggregate of rules and materials which govern both the *making* and *handling*, or production and consumption, of any given product".
- b. The *product* (message) is "any performed set of signs, i.e., including a given behaviour".

- c. The *producer* (addresser) is “an individual who produces, by actively operating a repertoire, either repetitively producible or ‘new’ products”.
- d. The *consumer* (addressee) is “an individual who handles an already made product by passively operating a repertoire”.
- e. The *institution* (context) consists of “the aggregate of factors involved with the control of culture. It “governs the norms, sanctioning some and rejecting others”, “remunerates and reprimands producers and agents”, and “determines which models (as well as products, when relevant) will be maintained by the community for a longer period of time”.
- f. The *market* (contact) is “the aggregate of factors involved with the selling and buying of the repertoire of culture, i.e., with the promotion of types of consumption. (2005: 14-35).

In the essay, “The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Role of Transfer” (1997), Even-Zohar repeats that: “the major concept in the theory of culture I employ” is that of repertoire, defined as “the aggregate of options utilised by a group of people, and by the individual members of that group, for the organisation of life” (2005: 73). He considers the concept at some length, again discussing “the structure of the repertoire” (comprising “individual elements and models”); “the dynamic parameters of repertoire usage”; “the making of repertoires” “the making of repertoire and the institution” and “repertoires and identities”.

But this essay also adds two important new concepts to Even-Zohar’s discourse formation. The first is indicated in the term “group of people”. Even-Zohar uses this term extremely loosely. It may refer to “a large group of people living on a certain territory, normally referred to as ‘society’, but also to a small number of people living in the same apartment, normally referred to as ‘a family’”. In either case, they are “aggregates of people whose life is organised by a certain culture” (2005: 73). This shift is the foundation for the third part of his book on the more practical aspects of “Culture Planning” (which I shall not pursue here).

The second conceptual development is the reference to the two major procedures for making new repertoires: “invention” and “import” (2005:

77). The discussion of “import” leads to old discussions of “transfer”, and its success in situations in which there is an “absence” in the targeted group; a “willingness to consume new goods”; “when new situations are introduced ... and there no, or a slight, home repertoire to handle them”; or “if the other repertoire is richer, more prestigious among many groups, or may even promise 'a better life'” (2005: 77-78).

“Invention” itself leads in new directions, to “*people* engaged in the making of repertoire who are, in the particular case of transfer, agents of transfer” (2005: 79). This shift provides a foundation for the third part of the book, as well as for the fourth part, “Intellectuals and Success”.

In this regard, Even-Zohar's greatest interest still falls on texts, and particularly “on a small group of people ... popularly known under various titles, such as 'writers', 'poets', 'thinkers', 'critics', 'philosophers' and the like, [who have] produced an enormous body of texts in order to justify, sanction and substantiate the existence, or the desirability and pertinence of ... the German, Bulgarian, Italian and other nations” (“The Role of Literature”, 2005: 133).

In some cases, they have also produced themselves: “For example, states of mind and encouragement to act for 'freedom', 'heroism', 'patriotism', 'equality', or less stirring acts like 'cleanliness', 'order', or 'good food', are not derived from 'writings', but from what one has heard of the 'writers' which often falls into the category of myth” (2005: 79).

The more recent papers in these later parts of *PCR* deal with “idea-makers”; “cultural entrepreneurs”; “makers of life images”; while not forgetting the “thousands of agents ... recruited to popularise the texts of the few initiators, and to spread the language they used in these texts”, namely “teachers and ... intellectuals” (2005: 133).

## COMING BACK TO TRANSLATION STUDIES

Even-Zohar's work on literary polysystem was extremely important for systematic thinking about the nature and work of translation between nations. With his thinking on culture, it might be considered that Even-Zohar has moved away from literary translation to broader concerns. This

shift is marked by an assumedly non-ideological perspective. As Nam Fung Chang pointed out in his presentation to the Historical Translation Research Seminar at the University of Manchester in 2000, Even-Zohar's recent re-writings of his papers have deleted nearly all references to ideology, power, politics, economics, language and literature, except in the most general terms (2001).

By way of contrast, the "cultural turn" in Translation Studies is very much concerned with: "how values, ideologies, and institutions shape practices differently in different historical periods" (Venuti 1998: 315). Translation Studies and Culture Research are different academic areas, now working in different directions, it would seem.

Nevertheless, Culture Research leads us back to the recognition that language and culture (however we define the term) are intimately related, and that this relationship in itself is crucial to the work of translation. The concept of "repertoire", in particular, encourages us to consider the roles of language and literature, and therefore translation as well, in the formation of new nation-states. It also asks us to explore the work of translators as agents of change, using frameworks other than those already established by feminism and postcolonial theory.

If we see this, we can acknowledge the importance of what Even-Zohar is attempting, even if we cannot accept his results, as many still can not. In an earlier article, I described some of the criticisms which scholars have made of Even-Zohar's work.

Anthony Pym, for example, has suggested that "much of translation history can advance quite well without using the word 'system' at all". He finds the systems postulated by Even-Zohar are ultimately vague; they rely on "leaps of faith"; they "suppress a humanized, subjective systematicity"; and that, while system theories in general aim to be "scientific", they are "not very good ... at formulating causal hypotheses" or, equally important, in putting forward ethical propositions (1998: 116-124). This would still seem to apply to the *Papers in Culture Research*.

Edwin Gentzler, too, while acknowledging "the advances" made by Even-Zohar, also notes four "minor problems" with Polysystem theory

which would seem to be equally applicable to Culture Research. These are: a “tendency to propose universals based on very little evidence”; an “uncritical adoption of the Formalist framework” and some of its concepts which “underlie, yet seem inappropriate to ... [his] complex model of cultural systems”; “the problem of locating the referent”; and, finally, “Even-Zohar’s own methodology and discourse”, with its assumed scientific objectivity and assumptions of total completeness (1993: 120-3).

These problems (which are obviously not “minor” at all) suggest the need for further conceptualisation of Even-Zohar’s more recent premises. They do not necessarily negate the premises, but certainly call for caution in their application, while encouraging us to do better ourselves.

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