

INTERVIEW WITH ZOHAR SHAVIT



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Zohar Shavit¹ is a full professor in the School for Cultural Studies in Tel Aviv University, Israel. In 1978 she concluded her Ph.D under the supervision of Itamar Even-Zohar, with a dissertation on modernism in Hebrew poetry of the 1920s. Departing from the fundamentals of Polysystems theory, the author has been presenting, since the 1980s, innovative reflexions in the field of children's literature (CL), many of which regarding translation and international traffic of CL. Besides her best-known work, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (1986), Shavit has written an important group of academic articles and book chapters in which she deals with ambivalence in CL, with the need to formulate a poetics for its study, with the role of translations in the formation of Hebrew CL, with the phenomenon of cultural interference, with the canon.

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In this interview, Shavit tells us how she has developed her interested in children's literature, having become one of the main references in the field. She also makes clear some key points in her work, such as the notions of system and ambivalence, and her historical model of the development of children's literature. Finally, she discusses the paths of contemporary research on CL and translation.

A Portuguese full version of this interview follows at the end of this article.

1) What led you to be interested in children's literature and translation? Can you tell us a little about your academic story?

I was always attracted to children's literature and translation and in fact, as a student I made my living by translating books, most of them for children. I believe that the first book I translated was Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* (1975). However, at the seventies, writing a doctorate thesis on children's literature in the department of literature or in any other department in the faculty of humanities, was out of the question. So I wrote my PhD thesis on another fascinating theme, which dealt with the construction of Hebrew culture in Palestine Eretz-Israel.

I was 27 years old when I submitted my thesis and I did not want to spend the rest of my life working on the same questions and themes of my doctorate dissertation (to which, however, I came back at a later stage of in my career). So I decided to start something new, and this something new was research of children's literature. I made this choice not only because I am so fond of children's literature, but also because of the huge research potential which is hidden in the field. At that time the study of children's literature was not yet considered legitimate in cultural studies; but children's literature itself craved to be studied – there was so much to be done and it was all so new and so interesting! I was consciously willing to break a new path, something that not too many scholars have done thus far. Indeed, much was written about children's literature, but often from a pedagogical point of view based on a very traditional theoretical framework, certainly not a cutting-edge theory, as was Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystems theory, which served as the conceptual framework for my work.

In this framework the "literary system" is conceived of as a theoretical concept that describes a network of dynamic relations between literary groups, literary institutions, texts, repertoires and audiences, a reticulation of relations changing from period to period in accordance with what is considered "literature" in a given society.

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Nonetheless, in hindsight I must admit that the decision to deal with children's literature turned out to be far from being simple, because I had to "prove" my scholarly value, so to speak in other fields as well. Indeed, if you look at my list of publications, you can see that more than half of my books and articles do not deal with "children's literature."

Nowadays I think the academic world is much more tolerant, open, and ready to accept the study of any theme not because of its privileged cultural status, but because of its potential for research. In other words, we do not identify any more the "cultural" value attributed to a certain object with the scholarly interest we may find in it.

Now, why translation? The main reason for my great interest in translation lies in the fact that translation always involves a dialogue between at least two systems. When one deals with translations one always enters into discussion of cultural dialogue/s. Thus for instance, translation, or rather *transfer* (to use Even-Zohar's notion) from adult to children's children also involves a dialogue between two systems differentiated by the construct of their addresses. And the analysis of this dialogue opens the door to the exploration of many phenomena that otherwise are more difficult to explore. In addition, in Hebrew culture, in Hebrew-Jewish culture, like in many other small cultures, translation plays an extremely significant role in both the construction of the system and later on in its maintenance.

Modern Jewish culture has had two beginnings: the first one in Europe, with the Haskalah movement (the Enlightenment movement), and the second with the building of a new Jewish national society in Palestine-Eretz-Israel. In both cases translations played a major role in giving them legitimization, as was the case during the Haskalah movement, and by filling the system, as was the case towards the end of the 18th century and then again at the beginning of the 20th century. In both, the Hebrew-Jewish system used to translate texts from cultures that enjoyed a high status, such as the German, the Russian, the English or the French. The massive translational activity responded to the need to build a new system from scratch. Translations which were available made this task much easier. This is the main reason for the significant place that translations occupy in my work. As a matter of fact, I do not deal only with translations, but you are right in suggesting that I focus on translations, and sometimes mainly on translations.

2) *Gideon Toury and Itamar Even-Zohar are fundamental references on Translation Studies all over the world. How do you see the theoretical importance of their work for the research on children's literature more specifically?*

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Itamar Even-Zohar and the late Gideon Toury indeed became the pillars of Translation Studies and the work of Itamar Even-Zohar was a breakthrough in culture research. Both Gideon Toury and I were students of Itamar Even-Zohar, who was our great mentor and both of us have used his Polysystems theory as the basis for our work. Itamar Even-Zohar has constructed a theory, or a set of theoretical notions, where children's literature, or any other system in culture could fit in. When you use the notions of Polysystems theory, you can deal with children's literature without any sense of inferiority, in the same way you deal with literature for adults, literature for women, literature for any gender or any other social group. This theory is not pejorative; it enables a discussion which is free of any judgement. You analyze a certain phenomenon in culture not because of its so-called "aesthetic" value, but because it allows you to ask interesting questions, and of course, the most important advantage of this theory is that it offers the possibility to study the dynamics of culture in its multi-relations facet.

I find this theoretical conception fruitful because it places the discussion in the context of culture in its totality, especially in terms of its relations with other literatures as well as other societal systems. The whole idea is that you discuss dynamics of culture, and not static entities.

The value of my work, I believe, lies in the exploration of the dynamics of children's literature, among which paramount prototypes and patterns which characterize children's literature, such as changing notions of childhood, ambivalence, poor self-image, turning a disadvantaged peripheral status into an advantage – all these derive from the understanding of children's literature as part of a larger dynamic polysystem.

Furthermore, as we all know, it is the existence of a reservoir of new questions, or the very existence of its potential, which ensures the ongoing vitality of any discipline. Even-Zohar's theory enables us to propose new questions and to release children's literature from traditional and worn-out questions of either pedagogic, social studies, education or literary studies and discuss it instead in the framework of semiotics of culture. Working in the framework of semiotics of culture allows us to deal with the multi-systemic situation typical of children's literature. It allows us to inquire into children's literature in the broadest possible context – into its multi-relationship with social norms, literary norms and educational norms, and analyze how texts for children are a product of this complicated net of relationships. Furthermore, it allows us to examine how in turn texts for children shape societal ideals and ideas and take part in transforming them into new paradigms.

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3) In an article from 1994 (*Beyond the Restrictive Frameworks of the Past: Semiotics of Children's Literature – A New Perspective for the Study of the Field*), you stated that children's literature was "the Cinderella of literary studies." 25 years later, do you believe that this remains the case?

Yes and no. I believe that in most cases children's literature is still the Cinderella of literary studies. This context reminds me of the following anecdote: A well-known writer for children attends a cocktail party, when someone approaches him and asks: "What do you do for a living?" He answers: "I write for children." So this person says: "Oh, maybe I'll try it one day." In response, the writer asks him: "What do you do for living?" and he answers, "I'm a brain surgeon." So the writer comments: "Oh, maybe I'll try it one day."

There is a feeling that anyone can write for children and everyone can do research on children's literature because it is so simple and within reach. I believe that there is still a kind of patronizing attitude towards children's literature and towards its study. As a scholar you can "improve" your "academic status" and get a kind of academic certificate if you manage to "prove" yourself in other fields of research.

There are two manifestations for this state of affairs. First of all – the gender: most scholars of children’s literature are women, and this unfortunately, we must admit, is always a kind of sign for an inferior status of the field. A social field dominated by women suffers from less prestige than a field governed by men. Usually professions that are almost “free” from women enjoy a somehow higher position. This is the truth of the matter: when women enter the club, it becomes less prestigious, to quote Groucho Marx: “*I Don’t Want to Belong to Any Club That Will Accept Me as a Member.*”

That being said, we do see that children’s literature began to gain status as a legitimate academic field, not only in schools of education or pedagogy. In this sense, I think it is an “improved Cinderella.” The problem also derives from the tendency of scholars of children’s literature to adopt this image and not to dare to bring new paradigms; they prefer to stick to worn-out notions or theories that previously were used by the study of adult literature. When they are applied to the study of children’s literature, not only they are often not adequate, but because they adopt theoretical notions that are already outdated, they preserve the unprivileged status of the study of children’s literature. It is a vicious circle that creates a sentiment of left behind of children’s literature’s scholars. But this is not always true. In some cases it is the study of children’s literature that is at the frontage of cultural studies because of its ability to shed light on complicated cultural issues. Thus, on the one hand, the studies on children’s literature often remain not very daring and rather conservative and at the same time, some of the research done is indeed a breakthrough and could not have been accomplished in any other field of study, because of the unique perspectives it offers.

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4) In your works, when studying the development of children’s literature, we see a special emphasis on translations. Could you talk a little about the importance of Translation Studies for the research in children’s literature?

Children’s culture and children’s literature in particular are **always** a result of translation or “transfer.” Translations, as I have said before, always enable us to approach a certain object from various and different perspectives. As Gideon Toury taught us, translation is based on the tension between two poles: equivalency and adequacy. The analysis of this tension enables us to uncover patterns and structural features that are difficult to expose when you deal with one text only, because the comparison of two or more texts can lead to detecting new readings and interpretations of the same text/s.

The analysis of the translator's work always involves a *deautomatization* of both the source and the target system when a multitude of questions are raised: "Why did you phrase it that way? Why did you turn a concrete description into an abstract one? Why are there those additions or omissions? etc., etc. Such an analysis sometimes becomes very telling and you can learn a lot on each of the cultures in question – the target and the source. Since I am interested in culture/s in the large sense, I find the analysis of translations very instrumental for the study of culture/s.

5) *In the article The Historical Model of the Development of Children's Literature (1994), you develop an idea already presented in 1986 Poetics of Children's Literature, which is the universality of a general structure of development for all children's literatures. This idea has been criticized by Emer O'Sullivan (Comparative Children's Literature, 2000), who states that some literatures may not fit this "north-west European model." Could you comment a little on that?*

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On a conceptual abstract level, this model is certainly valid. It is less so when we come to more concrete levels. Thus, it depends on how broad the understanding of the notion of universality is. Nevertheless, I believe it is rewarding to deal with **universality** and to see how this conglomerate of two systems and more and the existence of an a-priory constant dual readership, always participates in the construction of what we label "children's literature."

Children's literature always operates under the constraints of at least two systems, whereas adult literature is more "liberated," and has much more freedom to operate. Even when texts for children try to challenge these constraints, for instance those of the educational system, they are still there, and must be taken into account. You always have in mind these two groups of readers – adults and children, which differ sustainably as a social construct. This is the case even when children's literature endeavors to challenge adult culture by pretending not to care about it, which by the way never really happens. In this sense, this model of duality is certainly valid and very helpful for our understanding of the child culture.

Undoubtedly, the opposition between the two systems – the educational and the literary as well as the opposition between adults and children – always determines the nature of children's culture.

6) *Quite a few researchers, among which we can mention Göte Klingberg, have pointed out that translators of children's literature usually take more liberties when translating than*

translators of adult literature. Do you believe anything has changed in recent years regarding this general norm?

I think it has changed in the sense that in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th translators used the source texts as raw material. They had the liberty to do anything they wanted in order to adjust text to the target system. Unfortunately for me I do not know Portuguese and thus I never studied the case of translations into Portuguese, but I am almost sure that this was true for translations into Portuguese, as it was with translations into Hebrew, Yiddish, French and German. This, however, is not the case any more. Translators are more and more expected to produce full and adequate translations.

As a case in point I can bring my last study of domestication in translations into Hebrew, which I recently presented in a conference in Granada, Spain. There I have discussed how this norm predominated translations into Hebrew. Everything was domesticated: first names, last names, foods, customs and holidays. Thus for example, a Christmas tree became a Hanukkah – the nine-branched menorah that symbolizes the Jewish holiday, non-kosher foods were replaced by kosher foods (veal replacing pork), and Jewish prayers replaced the Christian. Sometimes it became ridiculous, because the illustrations presented in a picture books would show a swine while the text refers to a cow.

This norm is over. Translators are more and more expected nowadays to produce an adequate text and render the world presented in the source text without "converting" it. In this sense I think that major changes took place, at least in the literatures I study, although I cannot guarantee that it is true for other literatures.

7) In Poetics of Children's Literature and in other works you talk about ambivalent texts: texts with a diffuse status within the literary system, especially in what regards their implied readers – children and adults. How could we relate that notion to the more recent term crossover literature?

At a first glance there seem to be no real difference between the notions of ambivalent and crossover literature, because very often they refer to the same texts, they both deal with texts which at the same time address children and adults. But I contend that they are profoundly different because they represent totally different understanding of the cultural system – the difference between a dynamic and static understandings.

In the framework of traditional static conception, texts were classified into categories resembling drawers, which did not leave room for texts whose status is not unequivocal. Here

exactly comes the concept of ambivalence which deals with texts located in more than “one drawer” and requires the possibility of analyzing the *dualism* of their status. Phrased differently, **the concept “ambivalent text” refers to texts that enter simultaneously into more than one systemic opposition within mutually exclusive systems.** In the case of ambivalent texts, the question of what system they belong to is of significance, since they play precisely with the point of their non- or dual membership. The theoretical possibility to investigate ambivalent status and contradictory functions is crucial, since our interest centers on a group of texts that belong officially to the system for children – although the fact that they are perceived and accepted as suitable for adults is a *sine qua non* for their success as texts for children. Thus, the whole idea of the notion of ambivalence (a Yuri Lotman’s notion which I elaborated), is to point to the systemic dynamics. The notion of ambivalence pertains to exclusiveness, which means that we deal with a group of texts that cannot be accepted either by adult or by children’s literature. They are excluded from both systems and accepted by both on the basis of their being excluded. Here we deal the reasons for their *exclusion* – the dynamics of exclusion, and how writers and publishers use this exclusion for inclusion. Crossover literature takes into account only inclusion, dealing with texts that are included both in children’s and adult literatures. Here the end and the beginning are the same: you begin with texts that are included in both adult and children’s literature and you end with them. But with the notion of ambivalence the end and the beginning are different. We begin with exclusion, which eventually becomes inclusion, but a very conditioned inclusion: you can be accepted by each of the systems only if you are accepted at the same time by both. The notion of ambivalence thus allows for a more delicate and much more sophisticated analysis. You take into account more factors, you try to understand what makes it work for both audiences. I have read several fine articles that deal with crossover literature and learned a lot. Still I think that the use of the notion of ambivalence would yield a more sophisticated analysis.

8) *How do you believe recent studies in the field of children's literature have evolved in terms of leaving behind old methodologies, such as those provided by classical literary criticism?*

As I said above, some scholars are highly conservative and tend to pose questions that were asked by scholars of adult literature 20 or 50 years ago. Others are even worse in my view because they seem to chase fashionable theories without asking themselves whether they are at all relevant to the field. Still many scholars are doing serious and valuable work.

First of all, the study of the history of childhood and adolescence has achieved marvelous results. Very good scholarly works have come out, and are still coming. Moreover, scholars began to be very attentive to the developments in the field and to explore other media for children, such as children's games, illustration, films and theater and, of course, the whole issue of digital culture for children. Here scholars often find themselves in the foreground of culture studies. This is also true for studies of children's and youth leisure and the whole issue of Screen Agers.

Again, you find studies of child culture at two poles: some very advanced, and some very old-fashioned. The more advanced studies are done, to the best of my knowledge, mainly in Europe, in Scandinavian countries, in Germany, in England and France and the Spanish-speaking world; much less so is done in the United States. In the United States I find that most of the research is very conservative and at the same time there is a constant endeavor to be fashionable. Now they have discovered the gender studies, and you find a lot of works on gender and children's literature. Ten years ago it was the studies on racism or old age. I am not too fond of this kind of rapidly changing paradigms of research because they never get a chance to evolve seriously. Changing the scientific paradigms every five or ten years, does not leave enough room to mature properly.

You must also take into account that much of the research done is not accessible to me due to the language barrier, which is really very regrettable. I very much hope that more studies will get translated.

9) What do you believe are the most fruitful paths for contemporary research on children's literature, especially in what regards Translation Studies?

I have already pointed to the advantages of Polysystem theory and I would like to mention further the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his notions of "fields" "cultural capital" and assets (*les biens*), which are of utmost importance for our work. These theoretical notions are very valuable for the study of translation, because they let you better analyze both the selection process of certain items for translation as well as their handling. For example, when you analyze the selection process, it is the cultural capital that usually determines whether you choose to translate a certain text, and how you choose to translate it. When a certain text enjoys high cultural value, if it is culturally highly ranked, translators would most likely will have fewer liberties in their treatment of the texts and endeavor to produce an adequate translation.

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