Note on a repertoire for seeing cultures

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Thankfully accessible and biblically concise, Itamar Even-Zohar's notes on "The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Role of Transfer" (*Target* 9:2) invite reflection and response. Much of the text is commendable. I particularly like, for instance, traces of a certain concern about the future ("the fate of societies and cultures", 355), which might yet draw us beyond timeless descriptivism or directionless deconstruction. Here, perhaps, there is something important to be found in the matter of cross-cultural movements. I am also quite happy with the general concept of repertoire ("the aggregate of options utilized by a group of people, and by the individual members of the group, for the organization of life", 355), which seems rather more tangible than the previous dehumanized talk of a system as "the assumed set of observables supposed to be governed by a network of relations" (Even-Zohar 1990a: 27). Now, at least, there are people with something to do (they make choices, perhaps as in a Hallidayan system) and with a reason for doing it (they have a life to organize, perhaps with practical sense, as in Bourdieu), although one could argue that such things were always so obvious that the polysystematizers never really had to mention them. Ditto, I suppose, for the language component and communication channels so rightly emphasized by José Lambert (in *Target* 10/2). All of that seems implicit enough to get by as an attractively wider frame for translation studies; none of it really worries me.

My concern is rather more circumstantial. The dates being what they were, I happened to read Even-Zohar's piece at the same time as several articles marking the 50th year of the Israeli State. An entirely fortuitous coincidence? Perhaps so, given that Even-Zohar is clearly trying to think through more than his own national culture. Then again, perhaps not, since 50 years is most of a life; it's surely a point for reflecting on past and future fate; and the repertoire of theoretical concepts available to any theorist is partly constructed, selected, and applied in view of the life most at hand. No, I'm not going to say that Even-Zohar's is just an Israeli view of cultures (nor that my own is irremediably Australian). But consider, if you will, the following peculiar features:

First, when considering the subjects presumed to have a cultural repertoire, Even-Zohar privileges "a large group of people living on a certain territory" and "a small number of people living in the same apartment", both of which are strangely considered "by definition cultural entities" (356). Both items imply spatial delimitation, at base the "territorial principle" that Lambert correctly questions, devolving into terms such as "the home system", to which Even-Zohar later reverts (358). Why especially these groups, and this particularly territorial criterion, from among the repertoire of all available kinds of groups and criteria? Am I entirely wrong to look at all those historical maps of Israel and the associated territorial debates? Should we leave the importance of the family (all in the one apartment?) to a question of Jewish stereotypes? More important for where Even-Zohar wants to take us, why ask immediately about the size of "the" group, as if cross-cultural transfer only involved the history of one divinely defined space? Even in the case of Israel, perhaps especially, there were repertoires prior to the territory as we know it.

My second doubt is more technical: "Transfer", says Even-Zohar, "is the process whereby imported goods are integrated into a home repertoire", and "[n]aturally, not all imported goods result in such 'transfers'"(359). Naturally? As a matter of definition, I suppose the term "transfer" is in such a mess that we are all more or less free to use it as we see fit. Now, finally, I understand a little better Even-

Zohar's previous calls for "transfer studies" as a general frame for looking at translation (1981, 1990, cf. Pym 1992), although I would suggest that a better term for the integration of things is probably "integration". Nevertheless, beyond the words, there seems to be a hell of a lot riding on this apparently ontological distinction between just moving an object ("importation") and making it part of your repertoire ("transfer"). What then is the cultural status of items somehow imported yet not successfully "transferred"? Surely they are there, somewhere, with meaning for someone? Where is their repertoire? On what territorial or categorical foundations? More pointedly, imagine several million Russians "imported" into Israel from the former Soviet Union but not effectively "transferred" (integrated) in any cultural or political sense. What would Even-Zohar's terms say about them? Well yes, now they should probably become integrated, "transferred", since a repertoire must be created, national life must be organized (we are told nothing about possible needs to break up organizations). The analytical terms would even seem in tune with what I'm told is a Department of Immigration and Absorption (although I'm typically informed I miss the connotations of the Hebrew terms). Not just movement but cultural adaptation as well. Two clear steps, not one hesitant or looping process marked by debate and resistance. Are the terms mere terms? As in the shift from "assimilation" to "integration" to "inclusion" in Australian Aboriginal policy since the 1960s, so many words are produced while the real problems obstinately remain: the imported-but-not-integrated covers a whole range of social possibilities, a gamut of multicultural repertoires, of people living with more than one repertoire, of seriously productive challenges to national and family organizedness, and of steps toward progressive social fragmentation that find no marked place in the "naturally" of Even-Zohar's distinction. Once again, the theorist has given us just two items from a potentially much wider repertoire. And what is overlooked or unnamed might turn out to be more interesting than the options identified.

Exactly what is unnamed here? Who are we invited not to see? Most obviously, the possibility of people with multiple repertoires, perhaps many translators. Consider carefully the agents excluded in the following passives: "the targeted group" (357) (exactly who is doing the targeting?); "goods are imported" (358) (by whom?); "a willingness to consume [goods] is somehow aroused" (359) (again, aroused by whom, and to what end?). If we look for the deleted agents, we do indeed find a few explicit but contradictory mentions. First, it seems, repertoires "are made, learned and adopted by people, that is the members of the group" (357). So agency is apparently already with the "home" group, singular, and strangely common to all the members of that group, without fissures. Then again, we find that transfer involves "the images projected into society by the people engaged in the making of repertoire" (361), so agency now belongs to rather special people who are somehow sufficiently outside of the group to project things into it, even though they were previously described as members of the same group. Are these our translators or professional intermediaries? How did they get into this strange inside/outside location? Are they in the space of any properly cultural repertoire? Further, we find mention of the more international agency of "two-three industries, located in two-three countries" (361), industries (not people?) that would perniciously dominate the repertoires of television films, now well beyond the comforting homeliness of any properly cultural group. In all, agency here finds no real home. It is variously within "the group", on the fringes and overlaps of groups, and in some manipulative Olympus that would homogenize repertoires and potentially do away with groups altogether. Significantly enough, the term "power" is only mentioned once in Even-Zohar's text, right at the end, without integration ("transfer"?) into the general repertoire of theoretical terms.

Let me stop picking and say what I think. I suspect (although I can't prove) that the vagueness of Even-Zohar's agency is conceptually related to his distinction between "import" and "transfer", such that the latter agency, the capacity to integrate rather than merely move, is attributed a degree of cultural authenticity denied to the former. Agents can import (why is export not mentioned?), they can globalize as much as they like, but the more significant cultural work is reserved for home-group

souls who construct the truly organizing repertoires. As if there were no logic, system or organizedness in the overly commercial register of import (and yes, export). As if that too were not part of properly cultural processes. And as if there were not a range of deterritorialized intercultures (overlaps of cultures) actively engaged in both import and "transfer". Of which I shall now try to indicate one.

To understand my point, it is perhaps enough to apply the concept of culture repertoire to Even-Zohar's theorizing, as I have started to do above. One finds, I hope, that the concepts he uses to see and talk about cultures do not wholly belong to any one territorial or "home" culture. Even-Zohar's particular selection and arrangement of concepts is no doubt better suited to certain cultures rather than others (Jewish, French, Galician, plus the similar nations on his website), but his repertoire is by no means limited to that. Nor need it be just his repertoire. If I were to rewrite his text to address my own set of privileged situations, I would probably have to start at the end, focusing on the power of people who mediate between a multiplicity of cultures, with numerous strategies mixing both import and "transfer", and only then could I work my way through to the way target groups are delimited, with as few assumptions as possible about relative authenticity. Yet I can operate quite happily with more or less the same basic repertoire as Even-Zohar. Because we, as people who would try to see cultures, perhaps formally like translators and intermediaries of all kinds, are engaged in an activity that is professionally intercultural, in the overlaps, at once inside and outside. The real danger is that we become so concerned with seeing cultures that we fail to see our own cultural activity, and shortchange our repertoires accordingly.

References

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