Transfer of the Absurd: A different outlook on the role of translation and agents of reception

Shaul Levin
Tel Aviv University

The theatrical model known as the Theatre of the Absurd migrated to the Israeli Hebrew culture mainly from France and spread within it from the mid-1950s in a recurring process of transfer. From its very appearance in Israeli culture, the model has been present in two forms, an original written-in-Hebrew form and a translated-into-Hebrew form, existing side by side and relatively similar in extent. This differs from "typical" transfer states described in the past, in which a foreign model first appears in translation, followed by original adaptations or imitations, and only then by original production no longer perceived as epigonic.

The prevalent view in Translation Studies sees translation as a major vehicle for the transfer of textual models through culture. In contrast, the current study shows that the translated-into-Hebrew form of the model played a very limited role as a source of Absurdist characteristics in the writing of Israeli playwrights. Rather, direct contact with the model in its original European version, mostly on-location in Europe, has been the main channel responsible for the transfer of the model's characteristics into original Hebrew writing.

While traditionally, theatre critics are taken to function as agents of reception in the field, transfer of the model in question took place *despite* significant critical opposition. Repertoire and policy makers in both institutional and non-institutional sectors seem to have functioned, alongside their role as agents of transfer, also as the actual agents of reception for the model. The striking congruence of the local field with its French counterpart is best explained by these agents' striving to present a program roughly parallel to that staged in theatrical centres in the West. The notion of *critical mass* borrowed from the diffusion of innovations theory supports this understanding of the model's spread and reception in apparent disregard of critical opinion.

Keywords: Transfer theory, Reception, Diffusion of innovations theory, Theatre of the Absurd

References
Ben-Ari, Nitsa. 1997. *Romance with the past: The 19th century German-Jewish historical novel and the emergence of a national literature*. Tel Aviv: Dvir. [Hebrew]
Esslin, Martin. 1961 [2nd Ed. 1968; 3rd Ed. 1980]. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Anchor Books.
Even-Zohar, Itamar. 1990. *Polysystem Studies [=Poetics Today 11:1 (1990)]*.
Kohansky, Mendel. 1969. *The Hebrew Theatre: Its First Fifty Years*. Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press.
Levy, Emanuel. 1980. "National and Imported Culture in Israel." *Sociological Focus* 13.1: 37-53.
Rogers, Everett M. 2003 [5th Ed.]. *Diffusion of Innovations*. New York: Free Press.
Zarhy-Levo, Yael. 2001. *The Theatrical Critic as Cultural Agent*. New York: Peter Lang.