

ANTOINE BERMAN (1942–1991)

“Translation and the Trials of the Foreign”

Keywords:

deforming forces, deforming tendencies, the foreign, literal translation, textual deformation

1. Author information

Antoine Berman (1942–1991) was a French translator specializing in translating German and Hispanic literature into French. He was also a well-known theorist of translation whose name is to be linked with such concepts as foreignization, ethics of translation and literal (but not word-for-word) translation. He contributed to the TS as a fierce defender of *the foreign* in translation and influenced other scholars like Lawrence Venuti who translated his famous essay “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign” (1985).

2. Abstract

The article begins with the introduction of the notion of translation as *the trial of the foreign* in the context of literary translations, which is separated from non-literary translations and differences between these two are pointed. Berman claims that the former are much more liable to the so called “naturalization” which causes the loss of essence of the work, “the foreign.”

Then, the author examines the system of textual deformation in translated literature and discloses to the reader the reasons why the translator is never free of deforming forces: the ethnocentric structure of every culture and language as well as long tradition of such an approach has made them inherent to every translation.

Next, the twelve deforming forces or tendencies are analysed in separate subchapters and illustrated with examples taken from translations of great novels. These tendencies are:

rationalization, clarification, expansion, ennoblement and popularization, qualitative impoverishment, quantitative impoverishment, the destruction of rhythms, the destruction of underlying networks of signification, the destruction of linguistic patternings, the destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization, the destruction of expressions and idioms and the effacement of the superimposition of languages.

Having described the deforming forces, the author presents the gist of the article: the essence of the translating is not only the restitution of meaning but also labour on the form of the translated text. This, in turn, produces more faithful translation preserving the sense, signification and connotations that enable full understanding of the work.

3. Terminology

Source text term	Meaning	Term in Polish
cultivated language	a dominant language which is widely spoken, rich in vocabulary and may be refined	język rozwinięty
deforming forces	factors that cause the translated text to be inaccurate when compared to the original text; among them there are: rationalization, clarification, expansion, ennoblement and popularization, qualitative impoverishment, quantitative impoverishment, the destruction of rhythms, the destruction of underlying networks of signification, the destruction of linguistic patternings, the destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization, the destruction of expressions and idioms and the effacement of the superimposition of languages	czynniki deformujące
the foreign	all the components of the source text that would be perceived by the receiver of its translation as foreign, strange or peculiar	obcość

literal translation	the word <i>literal</i> is understood by the author as <i>attached to the letter (of works)</i> and not only to the meaning	przekład literalny
textual deformation	deformation that is present in the translated text and is the result of deforming forces	deformacja tekstu
vernacular language	a language that has a local character; it may be a dialect, jargon or slang	język lokalny

4. Methodology

The author bases his observations on his professional experience as a translator, primarily of Latin American literature into French. He created the list of deforming forces on the basis of the examples taken from the translations of classic novels.

He emphasizes that his analysis is provisional and, to be systematic, it requires the contribution of translators of other works from and into other languages and the cooperation of linguists and poets as well as psychoanalysts. He adds also that the negative analytic should be supplemented by the positive one which would study the operations that limit the deformation. Nevertheless, the number of examples taken from different literary works translated by various authors cause the results of the analysis and the conclusion to be quite reliable.

5. Links with other publications on the subject

Berman, A. 1992. *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Schleiermacher, F. 1992. "On the Different Methods of Translating", in André Lefevre (ed.), *Translation/History/Culture*. London. New York: Routledge.

Venuti, L. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London. New York: Routledge.

6. Critical commentary

The author presents his views in a logical, structured and convincing way, pointing out the causes and results of what he calls textual deformation. His observations seem to be accurate and quite interesting. I agree that foreignization is the best strategy in the translation of great classic prose and that the tendencies towards domestication may oversimplify its meaning and destroy the charm of the foreignness. Nevertheless, I am not convinced whether foreignization should be applied in the translation of each type of literature. In the case of lighter reading for less sophisticated readers, a certain level of naturalization or even domestication seems to be justified. It should be added that Berman's theory cannot be applied beyond the translation of literature. Still, Berman draws our attention to a very important problem and his analysis may contribute to the rise of quality of literary translation.

7. Quotations to remember the text by

“Unfortunately, a vernacular clings tightly to its soil and completely resists any direct translating into another vernacular. Translation can occur only between “cultivated” languages. An exoticization that turns the foreign from abroad into the foreign at home winds up merely ridiculing the original” (Berman 2000: 294).

“All translation is, and must be, the restitution of meaning” (Berman 2000: 297).

8. References

Berman, A. 2000. “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign”, in: Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. 284–297.