

Antoine Berman on Retranslation**Ayman Haj Yasin, Ph.D.**

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Summary

This article is a critical review of Antoine Berman's contribution to our understanding of retranslation, the repeated translation of a given text in the same language. It aims to define what is meant by retranslation and to outline and discuss the explanations that have been suggested by the French translator and theorist Antoine Berman (1942-1991) to account for this phenomenon. The study evaluates these explanations, showing to what extent they can be considered as accurate and productive explanations of retranslations and the features related to them. It is argued in this study that although Berman's contribution to the understanding of retranslation is seminal, the explanations he suggested are not sufficient to explain the complicated nature of this phenomenon.

Key words: Retranslation, first translation(s), The Progress Argument, The Updating Argument**Introduction**

This article is a critical review of Antoine Berman's contribution to our understanding of retranslation, the repeated translation of a given text in the same language. It aims to define what is meant by retranslation and to outline and discuss the explanations that have been suggested by the French translator and theorist Antoine Berman (1942-1991) to account for this phenomenon. The study evaluates these explanations, showing to what extent they can be considered as accurate and productive explanations of retranslations and the features related to them.

Section one defines retranslation and outlines its importance in the field of translation studies as a topic in its own right. Section two sets out the traditional explanation of retranslation as exemplified in the work of Berman (1990) and how they relate to the so called Retranslation Hypothesis. This section contains a criticism of these traditional explanations. The study ends with a conclusion and a bibliography.

What is Retranslation?

Retranslation is the repeated translation of a given text into the same language, or as Koskinen and Paloposki put it, "a second or later translation of a single source text into the same target language" (2010: 294). If Shakespeare's Hamlet is translated into Arabic in the 19th century, and then a new translation of the same play appears later in the 20th century in the same language, the first is called 'first translation' and the second is called 'retranslation'. The process through

which a new translation is produced is also called 'retranslation', and the context should tell whether the word 'retranslation' is used to refer to the retranslated text or to the process of retranslation. But the concept of retranslation is not clear-cut. For example, are the translations that appear at the same time or nearly the same time in the same language to be categorized as 'first translation' and 'retranslation'? Is the new translation that was produced in a single language, without the translator being aware of the existence of a first translation, a retranslation in the sense outlined above? These questions are difficult to answer, and it would be useful as a starting point to adopt an open and broad definition of retranslation such as that given in the first few lines of this section.

With the dominance of prescriptivism in Translation Studies, retranslation was ignored as a topic in its own right. Retranslations, as pointed out, "often serve as case studies illuminating other aspects of translational research rather than drawing attention onto themselves as a topic in itself" (2003: 2). But with the demise of prescriptivism and emergence of Descriptive Translation Studies and cultural approaches, retranslation has been seen as an important topic in its own right, opening the door for new questions and new areas of research.

The research on retranslation revolved around understanding the motivation for this phenomenon as well as the complex relationships between retranslation on one hand, and the source text and first translation on the other hand. According to a common explanation, retranslations are undertaken to "restore" first translations which tend to be assimilated and defective (Berman, 1990). Another common explanation states that translations emerge to reintroduce the foreign text because first translation(s) of the same text have become obsolete. These two explanations have their roots in the traditional thought of retranslation, but have recently become a subject of criticism (André, 2003; Venuti, 2003; Susam-Sarajeva 2003, Brownlie 2006, Hanna 2006; Song, 2012; Flotow, 2009). The following sections review Berman's point of view, and critically showing its limitations.

Berman on Retranslation

Developments in Translation Studies since the 1980s and 1990s have not only resulted in formulating and developing a wide range of approaches to translation, but also in broadening the range of issues discussed in this field by researchers from all over the world. Retranslation is one of the most recently discussed issues, despite the fact that the practice itself has a long history. Like other topics, retranslation has been approached from different perspectives that reflect the status and development in Translation Studies itself. Prior to the 1990s, thoughts and reflections on it were brief and impressionistic. It was thanks to the work of Berman (1990) that the issue started to receive the recognition that it deserves in Translation Studies. Because Berman's work on retranslation is seminal, it is appropriate to introduce and evaluate his contribution.

Berman's thought on translation in general and retranslation in particular is impacted by German Romantic thought as exemplified in the work of Schleiermacher, Benjamin, Heidegger, and

Gadamer, among others. In chapter two of this study, we see that the notion of translation as an act of foreignizing or resisting domesticating translation in the target language was the core of Berman's thought. For Berman, retranslation is closely linked to foreignizing translation as well as to the plurality of meaning and interpretation. Rather than thinking of retranslation as a mere reproduction of stable meanings or linguistic and textual practice, retranslation for him is a way to reconsider the foreign text in the translating culture. It is, as he puts it, "a major concern of a reflection, and a path that reopen the authentic access of a thinking" (Berman, 1992: 277). Retranslation as a phenomenon is significant because it is closely linked to the question of identity and difference. Retranslation involves complex relations between the translated text and the foreign text on one hand and the relationship between the retranslated text and previous translation(s) on the other hand. Two major explanations of the phenomenon of retranslation are given in Berman's work. The first is referred to in this study as "the Progress Argument", and the second as "the Updating Argument".

The Progress Argument

The Progress Argument refers to Berman's contention that retranslations mark a progress in translation because retranslations 'restore' the deficiencies in first translations by bringing the translated text closer to the source text. What this means in the case of the co-existence of several translations of a single text is that retranslation is a process of improvement from one (re)translation to the next [...]" (Skibińska, 2015: 1). This argument is rooted in the history and practices of translation because it is one of the common justifications for new translations that translators or publishers use.

Berman distinguishes between the time and place of first translations and the time and place of retranslations. This might seem trivial but, in this case, it is significant because it sheds light on the complex relationships between source text, first translation(s), and retranslation(s):

[I]t is absolutely essential to make a distinction between two spaces (and two times) of translation: one for translations, and one for retranslations. This distinction constitutes one of the crucial bases for a reflection on the temporality of translation. [...]. The retranslator is no longer confronted by one text, the original, but by two, which creates a specific space-original, first translation, retranslations. (translated and quoted in Vanderschelden, 2000: 16n)

Berman suggests that it is within this "specific space-original" that the masterpieces of translations are produced. For, "first translations are not (and cannot be) the greatest" (*ibid*). First translations differ essentially from retranslations in that the former tend to be assimilative (domesticating) compared with the latter which tend to be closer to the source text. First translations serve to introduce the source text to the foreign culture, but no more than this. Thus, retranslations emerge because of the assimilated and defective status of first translations. They are closer to the source text because they "do not need to address the issue of introducing the

text: they can, instead, maintain the cultural distance" (Paloposki and Koskenin, 2004: 27). Therefore retranslations tend to be closer to the source text than first translations. This is because retranslation is more "efficient in conveying the previously assimilated 'otherness' of the foreign material, because the target audience will have become acquainted with the text through the 'introduction-translation'." (Mathijssen, 2007: 17). Motivated by ethnocentricity, target cultures generally resist foreign works. This tendency is stronger when the foreign text is introduced to the target culture for the first time. This argument is also adopted by Bensimon (1990) who argues that:

[A]culture initially is often reluctant to embrace a text which is very foreign to it, so in order for the foreign text to be accepted into the new cultural sphere, it has to be adapted to the target culture. Later on, since the text has already been introduced, it is really no longer foreign, and translations can return to the original and be more source-oriented. (cited in Brownlie, 2006: 148).

Thus, first translations are not 'true' or 'good' translations because they serve to introduce the foreign work at the expense of the peculiarities of the foreign text.

What motivates retranslation is a movement toward more source-oriented translations of the foreign text with the increasing awareness of the assimilated and defective nature of first translations. However, Berman (1986) posits that retranslations do not completely delete the assimilation and defection in first translations, only manages relative success in this regard:

Every translation is deficient, that is to say, entropic, whatever its principles. This means that any translation is marked by "non-translation". And first translations are those which are most affected by non-translation. It is as though the anti-translating forces which cause deficiency were in that case most powerful [...] retranslation is a result of the need, not to surpass entirely, but at least to reduce previous deficiency. (translated and quoted in Vanderschelden 2000: 16n)

Berman places much importance on translation criticism because it sheds light on the defective and assimilated nature of first translations, paving the way for retranslations. The reason for this is that "the revelation of the essence of a foreign work to the target culture is accomplished after a historical process of a series of rewritings including commentaries and translations..." (Brownlie, 2003a:100-1). The commentary and criticism of the foreign work and its translations in the receiving culture help to pave the way for more literal translations of the foreign text. This is only possible if there is a distance between first translations and retranslations. This distance is necessary for Berman because it permits a new interpretation of the foreign work and could be used in "support of a more literal translation..." (Vanderschelden, *ibid*: 10). From this viewpoint, first translations tend to be target-oriented, whereas successive retranslations tend to follow a linear development toward source-oriented translation.

Therefore, the Progress Argument, as developed in Berman's work, states that retranslation is a process that occurs in time to restore the deficiencies in first translation(s). In his opinion, first translations are mere introductions of the foreign text into the target language because they are assimilated to dominant norms and publishing agendas in the translating language and culture. For Berman, each translation has an essence that "reveals" itself in the process of retranslation as it comes closer to the unique texture, and accordingly the unique meaning, of the foreign text. For this reason, retranslation constitutes a progress, an accomplishment. This accomplishment is made possible because of the increasing awareness of the defects and assimilated aspects of a first translation which become clear through translation criticism as well as through the process of retranslating itself. Retranslations, as Berman argues, are themselves a form of translation criticism because they shed light on the poor status of the first translation.

Berman does not base his explanation of retranslation on empirical studies, that is, he does not arrive at his explanation of retranslation in terms of the poor quality and domesticated nature of first translations, but rather upon adopting an essentialist point of view, taking it for granted that first translations are 'defective'. Berman's argument is not only a highly generalized statement about retranslations, but also an implicitly prescriptive presupposition that says that retranslation should be produced in a specific way to 'restore' first translation(s). Thus, it is not surprising that such a scheme of thought has been seen as untenable in Translation Studies. And it is for this reason that some scholars of Translation Studies have preferred to turn Berman's position into an empirical or descriptive hypothesis that can be tested. Chesterman, (2000) was the first to formulate this hypothesis naming it Retranslation Hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, retranslations are or tend to be closer to the source text than first translations (15).

Since its first formulation, the Retranslation Hypothesis as an empirical hypothesis has generated some theoretical discussions including how to construct "reliable methods for measuring 'closeness' or determining which 'units of comparison' should be used (Koskinen and Paloposki, 2010, Deane 2011). Koskinen and Paloposki posit that adopting different criteria of closeness or units of comparison "makes it hard to compare the results of existing studies" (*ibid*: 296). This is, in fact, true because key words such as "assimilated" "closer" can be understood in different ways and measured against different units of comparison (culture-specific items, grammar, style, lexis, dialects...etc).

However, apart from the aforementioned difficulties, it is argued that the Retranslation Hypothesis has been confirmed by some studies and denied by others (*ibid*). Rodriguez (1990) also remarks that "some retranslations are much closer to being adaptations of the source texts, succeeding the initial [more] literal translations" (cited in Susam-Sarajeva, 2003: 4). Referring to research by Brisset (2004), Brownlie (2006), and Koskinen and Paloposki (2004), Koskinen and Paloposki (2010) claim that recent studies provide "ample evidence both in support and in opposition to the Retranslation Hypothesis" (295, see also Feng, 2014: 73). What this simply

means is that “first translations cannot always be said to be domesticating and subsequent translations cannot always be said to be foreignizing” (Damanhoury, 2015: 9-10).

In addition to the Progress Argument, Berman presents another explanation for retranslation based on the notion that retranslations sometimes emerge to update existing translations in the target language. This explanation will be explained in the following section.

The Updating Argument

Language is not a static phenomenon. It changes over time. Translations produced in a particular time and place may later become unsuitable for the new generation who seeks either a revision of first translation(s) or a new one. This argument has been used to justify retranslation (Vanderschelden, *ibid*: 4-5). Accordingly, "it is often assumed that translations age more than the STs [source texts] and that it is normal to retranslate a classic for each generation, that is every twenty or thirty years" (*ibid*). The former explanation is traditionally associated with the notion that language changes and hence the need to "update the wording and terminology used in earlier translations" (Hanna, 2006: 198, also Susam-Sarajeva, *ibid*: 2).

Berman seems to follow this line of reasoning. However, he reformulates the argument into his own language and thought. According to him, translations ‘age’ and this leads to new translations. Original works, says Berman, remain ‘young’ whereas translations, with few exceptions, age with the passage of time’ (Gürçağlar, 1998: 234).

The few exceptions that Berman has in mind when he talks about translations that ‘age’ with the passage of time are the ‘great translations’ which are the true retranslations that "fall from the tree of the text in its autumn" (Berman, 1999: 104). These translations ‘reveal’ the essence of the original text and become an original themselves. However Berman argues that even a canonical translation does not completely halt the cycle of retranslations (Brownlie, 2006: 101). This argument or explanation has its root in the practice of translation, and some researchers still think of it as a possible explanation for retranslation (Wenjie, 2014: 195-6). However, it should not be considered a general explanation for retranslation because of the simple fact that retranslations may occur in a short time span (Gürçağlar, *ibid*).

In summary, Berman proposed two explanations for retranslation. The first, known as the Retranslation Hypothesis, states that retranslations emerge to ‘restore’ first translation, bringing them closer to the source text. The second attempts to account for retranslation by claiming that retranslations emerge to update first translations as they become outdated with the passage of time. Although these two explanations are simple and seem to be rooted in the practice of retranslation, both have become a subject of criticism. Almost all translation scholars who have studied retranslation subsequent to Berman have questioned his account, either explicitly or implicitly. The research done in this regard tends to reject Berman’s account, replacing it with a

more accurate and sophisticated account that takes into consideration the agency of translation and the socio-cultural and political settings of retranslation:

This view [Berman's view] has recently been questioned in a number of publications that suggest alternative explanations such as the agency of the actors involved, the power struggles and conflicting interpretations, or the economic reasons such as the marketing potential of retranslations (see details in Koskinen & Paloposki 2003). The idea of deficient first translations also tacitly assumes a view of linear progress, that is, a modernist world view which many commentators have found untenable (Susam-Sarajeva 2006; von Flotow 2009). Retranslations may actually capitalize on the status quo: preserving rather than improving or progressing on earlier translations of a canonized classic. (Paloposki & Koskinen, 2010: 296). However, the examination of these developments is outside of the scope of this article.

Conclusion

Berman's contribution to the understanding of retranslation is important. However, his claim that retranslations emerge to 'restore' or 'update' previous translations is not without its problems. Although the latter explanations cannot be ruled out a priori, they cannot account for the complicated nature of retranslation and the features related to them. His proposed explanations seem to reduce the process of retranslating into a mere textual relationship between texts, and ignores the socio-cultural and political context and the role of translators in motivating and shaping retranslations.

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