

Translating Bermanian concepts: between terminological fidelity and theoretical recreation

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ABSTRACT: This study includes an examination of the issue of translating concepts in Antoine Berman's "Translation and the Letter or the Inn of the Far Away," based on a comparison of the translation with the original. The aim of this comparison is to understand the extent to which the translator has successfully transferred Berman's concept. We begin by providing an overview of Berman's approach and his considerable contribution to the field of translation studies. Then, we analyze the transfer of some key concepts from Berman's theory by determining the strategies and mechanisms used in this transfer, as well as the difficulties and problems encountered by the translator Azzedine El khattabi, who must have significant linguistic and cultural knowledge of both the source and target languages. Finally, we propose solutions to overcome the problems that hinder effective translation of the concept that underlies any transfer of theories.

Keywords: Bermanian concept; Bermanian approach; problems; processes; strategies; translation.

1.INTRODUCTION

"Translation is a universal human activity, made necessary in all eras and in all parts of the globe by contact between communities speaking different languages"(Ladmiral, 1994). From this quote by Ladmiral we can deduce that translation has always played an essential role in all social, political, cultural, and economic relationships between societies, and thanks to this impact it has on the world, it is taking on an increasingly important role, and that the field of reflection and investigation into the act of translation remains necessary and open to all minds. That is why this presentation has chosen to address and reflect on issues related to the translation of concepts. Concepts are the basis of thought and reflection, so it is necessary to take them into account if we want to achieve effective translation. Our aim is therefore to explore the strategies used

by the translator, as well as the theoretical and practical problems encountered when transferring Berman's concept. Did the translator succeed in transposing the concepts of the original text and reconstructing the author's thinking in the translated text? And to do so, did he resort to literalism, or did it require creativity on his part? What problems were encountered? And how can they be solved?

To attempt to answer these questions, we have chosen to analyze the transfer of several concepts into Arabic in the translation of the work of the great translation scholar Antoine Berman, entitled "Translation and the Letter or the Inn of the Far Away." To do this, we have adopted an analytical and critical method.

2. THE BERMANIAN APPROACH

Before delving deeper into our research, we feel it is necessary to provide as comprehensive an overview as possible of the Bermanian approach and to understand the important contribution of his writings to the development of translation studies as a field of knowledge, which, like other sciences, has forged the terms necessary to designate its own concepts.

Berman, strongly influenced by German Romanticism, proposes a type of translation inspired by philosophical thought, namely "ethical" translation. This French linguist, translator, and theorist developed a theory that favors the source text. At the heart of Berman's approach is a contrast between the ethical aim of translation and an ethnocentric aim. According to Berman, this ethical aim, which he favors, is "positive" because it "consists of recognizing and accepting the Other as Other (...). Welcoming the Other, the Stranger, instead of rejecting or seeking to dominate them" (Berman, 1999). However, he rejects the ethnocentric approach and considers it "negative" because it denies any mark of otherness and any trace of strangeness.

Indeed, from "L'épreuve de l'étranger" and "L'Auberge du lointain" to his latest book, "Pour une critique des traductions", Berman does not maintain the same ethical stance. He no longer emphasizes the obligation of literal fidelity but asserts that "the translator has every right as long as he plays fair" (Berman, 1995). In other words, it is a question of placing the strangeness of the source text and the readability of the target text on an equal footing, hence a third way emerges, which is "the middle way," thus breaking with the eternal dichotomy between source-oriented and target-oriented translation.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is based on a qualitative approach that compares several key concepts from Antoine Berman's translation theory, as presented in his book "La traduction et la lettre ou l'auberge du lointain" (Translation and the Letter, or the Inn of the Far Away), with their Arabic translations (برمان، 2010) by translator Azzedine El Khattabi. Each concept is examined in order to clarify the translation processes adopted (calque, borrowing, literal translation, adaptation, etc.). The analysis also highlights the translation strategies used (exoticization or naturalization), as well as their effect on the transmission of meaning, readability, and fidelity to the original text. The methodology adopted makes it possible to identify the difficulties encountered when translating concepts and to propose solutions.

4. ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The transfer of Berman's concept: strategies and problems

Berman based his approach on numerous concepts. We will attempt to identify and analyze the Arabic translation of a few examples from his book “Translation and the Letter or the Inn of the Far Away,” which “is a slightly revised version of a seminar that took place at the International College of Philosophy during the first quarter of 1984” (Berman, 1999).

4.1.1 Ethnocentric

Let us take a first example, Berman's concept of “ethnocentric translation,” which, according to him, “reduces everything to one's own culture, norms, and values, and considers anything outside of it—the Foreign—as negative or only good for annexation or adaptation to increase the richness of that culture” (Berman, 1999). In addition to this detailed explanation of the concept, it is necessary to refer to the lexical meaning of the term “ethnocentric,” because the term is the expression of a concept in a given context, and the term and the concept are intrinsically linked like two sides of the same coin.

For its etymology: “From the Greek *ethnos*, meaning tribe, and the Latin *centrum*, meaning center” (Toupie, 2025). So, it is a term composed of two words, “ethno + centric”. It is an adjective “relating to ethnocentrism” (Cnrl, 2025), belonging to the field of anthropology and referring to “unconsciously motivated social behavior and attitudes that lead to favoring and overestimating one's own racial, geographical, or national group, sometimes resulting in prejudice against other peoples” (Cnrl, 2025). In other words, it means believing that the norms and values of one's own society are superior to the behaviors of other groups. We note that the lexical definition of this term and the definition given by Berman share the same idea.

The translator used the Arabic equivalent of the term “ethnocentric” “تمركز عرقي” employing “تمركز” to translate “centric” and “عرقي” to translate “ethno”. Admittedly, the use of an equivalent brings the meanings closer to Arabic-speaking readers, but we wonder whether it is sufficient to convey the meaning intended by Berman.

According to the Larousse dictionary, the word “عرق” can be translated into French as “race,” whereas “the concept of ethnicity differs from that of race, which concerns biological and morphological characteristics linked to common ancestors and not to culture” (برمان, 2010). For this reason, we believe it is better to borrow the Arabic concept “التمركز الإثني” or “الإثنوتمركزية” without the need to provide an explanation, as this concept should not pose a problem for Arabic speakers due to the fact that it is an old loanword that has had time to appear in French dictionaries. Furthermore, the context surrounding it in Berman's work provides the necessary information to make its meaning clear and transparent, and it is the closest translation of this Bermanian concept. We also found other Arabic translations used by other authors, such as “التعصب الإثني” and “العرقية الإثني.” These translations focus on the linguistic meaning of the term and neglect its terminological and conceptual meaning.

4.1.2 Hypertextual

This term is composed of the prefix “hyper,” which expresses excess or the highest degree, followed by the root “text.” It is commonly used in the field of computer science, but it has also been used in the field of

literature. According to Berman, the concept of “hypertextual” “refers to any text generated by imitation, parody, pastiche, adaptation, plagiarism, or any other kind of formal transformation, based on another existing text” (Berman,1999).

Furthermore, we note that Gérard Genette shares Berman's view on this concept. In *Palimpsestes*, he defines hypertext as “any relationship linking text B ([...] hypertext) to a previous text A ([...] hypotex) to which it is grafted in a way that is not that of commentary” (Genette, 1992). According to him, this is a form of transtextuality.

To achieve this, the translator conveyed this concept using the Arabic equivalent “التحول النصي,” which reflects the meaning intended by Antoine Berman and conveys the same effect of the source text to Arabic-speaking readers, while avoiding the literal translation found in several dictionaries, namely:

النص الشعبي/ المترابط/ المفرع (معجم مصطلحات السيميانيات الحديثة ، 2021)	-
النص الفائق (معجم مصطلحات السيميانيات الحديثة، 2021)	-
النطاق النص (يقطين، 2001)	-

However, these translations are closer to the field of computer science than literature. The idea that seems to be confirmed here is that "the term and the concept belong to a specific domain/field, so if the meaning of the word is related to the context and if a word has several meanings depending on the contexts in which it is mentioned, then the domain is a context for the term. The same term can have several concepts depending on the multiple fields or areas of knowledge that encompass it"(2022). *بتكمتني*,

We can therefore see that the relationship between the term and the concept here is far from unambiguous, and this is one of the conceptual difficulties: it is difficult to determine a suitable equivalent for such a complex concept.

4.1.3 Platonic translation

In “La traduction et la lettre ou l'auberge du lointain,” Berman identified three types of translation:

- "Ethnocentric translation
- Hypertextual translation
- Platonic translation" (Berman,1999).

The author has already analyzed the latter in his article “The Platonic Essence of Translation” (Berman,1999), in which he showed that the Platonic soul of translation lies in the ignorance of "the fact that the letter, once translated, finds another form of life in another language [...] and meaning is also immortal " (Mehran& Nasrine, 2017), because meaning is inseparable from the letter. This is why he asserted that for an ethical translation, this triple dimension must be destroyed.

The term “Platonic” is “relating to Plato and his own philosophy, a follower of Platonism” (Larousse, 2025), and since this concept is a proper noun, the widely held assumptions in translation theory were: “Proper nouns are untranslatable. This means that the translator must keep them as they appear in the source language” (Draeif, 2019).

Azzedine El Khattabi translated this concept as “الترجمة الأفلاطونية” opting for a loanword adapted to the Arabic graphic and phonetic system. In doing so, he preserved its local flavor, its strangeness, and the history it carries with it, while enriching the vocabulary of the host language, resulting in a good translation.

4.1.4 Adaptation

The translator used two Arabic equivalents for the concept of “adaptation”: ‘التكيف’ and ‘الاقتباس’. This phenomenon of synonymy in translation terminology is just one aspect of terminological chaos that indicates a lack of precision in terms and, consequently, in concepts.

Table 1. Other translations of the term Adaptation

The concept	Arabic translation	The dictionary
Adaptation	الترجمة بتصرف (ص29)	معجم دراسات الترجمة (2008)
Adaptation	اقتباس (ص36)	معجم المصطلحات الأساسية في الترجمة الأدبية (2017)
Adaptation	اقتباس (ص31)	معجم التعريفات للجرجاني (2010)
Adaptation	اقتباس، تكيف، تلاؤم، تأقلم، تأهيل، تحويل، تصرف، تعديل...	Almaany.com/Fr/dict/ar-Fr
Adaptation	تكيف، تأقلم، اقتباس	Larousse.Fr/Dictionnaires/Ex. A

Translators are faced with a set of terms that refer to the same concept, each of which is used in different situations. This problem is due to several factors, such as a lack of professionals and a lack of standardization and coordination between institutions.

That said, in order to translate this concept into Arabic, and for the sake of consistency in the text, the translator should be aware of the nuances that distinguish one synonym from another and choose a single equivalent that perfectly conveys the meaning intended by the author. Hence the need for linguistic, extralinguistic, and technical knowledge, as well as the right approach, understanding, and precise analysis, and above all, accurate interpretation by the translator to ensure the concepts are conveyed correctly.

4.1.5 Over-translation

We find the same problem as before in the translation of Berman's concept of “over-translation.” The translator has translated it literally, sometimes as “ترجمة أعلى” and sometimes as “ترجمة زائدة.” This polysemy allows the term “over-translation” to have two meanings, one positive and the other negative.

We can say that the translator is faced with the obstacle of the semantic-syntactic combination of a neologism that does not appear in either standard or specialized dictionaries. In this case, the translation shows the impossibility of accurately reflecting the key concepts of the source text in the translation.

Berman used the prefix “sur,” which “marks the position in relation to what is lower” (Lointenaute, 2025), and the base “traduction” to give birth to his concept. To explain this, the French theorist emphasized that “the creativity required by translation must be entirely devoted to rewriting the original in the other language and never produce an over-translation determined by the personal poetics of the translator” (Berman, 1999).

According to this definition, we find that the translation proposal ترجمة أعلى, which means “top translation,” does not reflect the author's intention. In order to avoid any ambiguity that could hinder the recipient's accurate understanding of the author's thoughts, it was necessary to translate it with a single expression, ترجمة زائدة, and to discard the other possibility.

4.1.6 Ethics

The next concept is “Ethics,” which is a basic notion in Berman's approach. According to him, “Translating is, of course, writing and transmitting. But this writing and transmission only take on their true meaning when guided by an ethical approach” (Berman, 1999). In other words, rejecting any negative aspects of translation, namely ethnocentrism and hypertextuality. In this regard, Berman emphasizes the importance of respecting others, accepting them, and welcoming them as different.

To translate this concept, the translator used two different methods. He borrowed the word أتفا by transposing the “que” pronounced ‘ق’ in Arabic at the beginning of the work, and he also used an equivalent translation, أخلاقية, throughout the text.

However, there is a difference between the two Arabic terms. According to the online dictionary Le Robert, “ethics” refers to “the set of moral concepts of a person or a community” (LeRobert, 2025) and can also be defined as “the principles that must not be exceeded, for example in a socio-professional sector, for morality as a personal or collective reference to values included in ethics” (Moreau de Bellaing, 2014). Therefore, the term “ethics” is more general than “morals” and encompasses it.

To avoid any risk of ambiguity between the translation of the two terms “ethics” and “morals,” which are translated by the same Arabic word أخلاقى, we propose to borrow and keep the name أتفا because it already exists in Arabic dictionaries. Even if “borrowing is a desperate solution” (1994), as Ladmiral points out, this process introduces new words and enriches the vocabulary of the target language.

At the end of this brief analysis, we can agree that translating texts in the humanities involves linguistic and conceptual difficulties and complexities. Despite this, the translator's choices result in a text that is coherent and understandable to a certain degree. The translator has succeeded in breaking the ice that separates the author from his foreign readers, through the use of both equivalents and borrowings, even if this goes against Berman's principle of accepting the other and confronting strangeness and foreignness so that translation becomes a gateway to the distant.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the translation processes used in the examples presented varied between literalness and equivalence, but in some cases the Arabic equivalent does not fully capture the specificity and originality of Berman's concept. This could represent a loss of effect and a deviation from the original and the author's thinking. This is mainly due to terminological problems that hinder good translation, such as synonymy and polysemy, which are dangerous linguistic phenomena that cause confusion at the level of the term, resulting in ambiguity and negatively affecting the reception of the concept and scientific message. In addition to the mobility of specialized terms, they are unstable, and there is a lack of unified terminology that would allow for the development of accurate and precise terminology. Therefore, modernizing specialized Arabic dictionaries is essential in order to resolve terminological issues, not to mention the challenge faced by translators, which is considerable, as they must have in-depth knowledge not only of translation but also of terminology, enabling them to find solutions to the problems posed when translating key concepts of a complex theory such as that of Antoine Berman, and ultimately achieve the main objective of translation, which is to communicate and transmit scientific knowledge between different languages and concepts.

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