

# Are there Norms for Literary Translation? Decentration Versus Ethnocentrism

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## Abstract

In the field of literary translation, requirements that usually characterize a “Good Translation” could be identified from two different perspectives of the target text:

1- Translation as a derived product from the source text which should always be the reference to assess and determine the *exactness* of the content of the target text.

2- Translation as “Independent Text” in the host culture which must be “*usable*.”

From this view, correctness is either based on norms of the source text (ST) environment or the target text (TT) environment.

This article will shed the light on the norms of literary translation as discussed by different approaches in the field of translation studies. Through a contrastive analysis of the different tendencies, it will come out with a general categorization of these norms hoping to present them in a more clear way and to make them useful for professional literary translators, teachers, as well as for students interested in literary translation.

**Key words:** Annexation - Domestication - Ethnocentrism - Fluency - Transparency - Readability - Naturalness - Otherness - Foreignization - Decentration - Alterity - Hybridity.

### **The Polysystem Theory of Translation**

When dealing with literary translation, the most known approach is probably the polysystem theory, developed in the 1970 by Itamar Even-Zohar, who actually borrowed his ideas from Russian Formalists and Czech structuralists. According to this theory, any literature could never be studied, understood or analyzed, in isolation from its social, political, cultural and historical framework; the *system* which dictates the literary rules and conventions of translation within a particular society at a specific period of time. This system include the criteria of selection of “*translatable*”<sup>1</sup> works, usually imposed by publishers, reviewers, official institutions and even by readers. Even-Zohar defines the *polysystemas* follows:

*A simple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent.*

Even Zohar (2003:3)

Later on, this concept was further developed by Gideon Toury through what is presently known as “*Descriptive Translation Studies*”. Starting from his early polysystem work with Even-Zohar, Toury tried to develop a general theory of translation which states that the sociocultural conditions, values and ideas shared by a community, constitute the main element which decides about what is right or wrong, adequate or inadequate. The Descriptive Translation Studies methodology, as suggested by Toury, is composed of three main steps:

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To situate the text within the target culture system, by looking at its acceptability by the host culture.

- 1- To analyze both ST and TG in order to figure out the differences, the similarities and the existing relationships (if any) between them. By so doing, we can identify the necessary changes to be introduced.
- 2- To make a generalization of the translating process concerning each language pairs according to the identified patterns.

Basing his concepts on Toury's, Chesterman proposes another series of norms of translation:

1- Product or expectancy norms: this concern the features that should characterize any translation in order to satisfy the reader. This suppose that the translator should be aware about the dominating tradition of literary translation in the host culture: the genre of texts to be translated, discourse conventions, ideological and political constraints. Chesterman (1997: 64).

2- Professional Norms: actually professional norms go in hand with the expectancy norms. Chesterman suggests three types of professional norms:

- a- The accountability norm: an ethical norm concerning professional standards. The translator has to assume his responsibility for the work he produced. (ibid: 68).
- b- The communication norm: a social norm concerning the translator as an actor in the

communicating process. He is supposed to ensure the maximum communication between the parties. (ibid: 69).

- c- The relation norm: a linguistic norm concerning the existing relation between ST and TT. The translator has to take into consideration: the text type, the wishes of the commissioner, the intentions of the original writer, and assumed needs of the prospective readers. (ibid: 69-70).

The professional norms are subject to validation by authority norms; social and ethical factors that were not covered by Toury's DTS.

### **The School of Paris and The Theory of meaning**

Also called the interpretative theory or the theory of sense, this way of perceiving and assessing the translation is mainly based on a communicative approach. Basing their concepts on the practice of conference interpreting, the tenants of this theory (Danica Seleskovicth& Marianne Lederer) consider translation as an act of communication. The translation process deals exclusively with message (meaning) rather than words (language). In order to fulfill the process of translation in a good way, the translator has to *deverbalize* his text (to separate the form, language, from the content, message). Language is considered as a *means of transport* of the message from point A (source text) to point B (target text). The translator intervene within the canal of communication in order to *INTERPRET* (to understand then to explain) the message. From this point of view, a word-for-word translation may even constitute a barrier to

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the act of communication. Elements that contribute in fixing the meaning of any text are always *extralinguistic; metatextual*. It is always the textual context, the situational context, the cultural and historical context (the discourse in general) that fix the meaning of the text and not language itself.

The following lines sum up the main concepts of this school:

- There is a difference between translating and transcoding.
- There is a difference between language and discourse (text).
- Discourse: the use of language within a particular situation, called context.
- There are two kinds of context: verbal context (Smallest Language unit that constitutes a meaning).
- Situational context: the material framework (the place where the discourse is taking place, gestures of the orator, and all material elements that may contribute in orienting and clarifying the linguistic statement).

### **The socio-linguistic approach**

In some types of texts, it is appropriate for textual equivalence to stay very close to formal correspondence, even the result seems “unnatural”. This is the case in translations of legal or scientific texts where exact wording is considered crucial to the message being conveyed. This kind of formal equivalence seeks to

preserve as many features of the original as possible. By contrast, dynamic equivalence seeks to accommodate the needs and norms of target culture readers, and to produce a text that will more naturally engage the reader. *“Even the old question: Is this a correct translation? Must be answered in terms of another question: For whom? Correctness must be determined by the extent to which the average reader for which a translation is intended will be likely to understand it correctly”*. (Nida 1969: 1). This implies that there always be different translations which can be called “correct”. Accordingly, the same original text will require several different levels of translation, in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structures if we want to give all peoples equal opportunities to understand the message.

Nida states that the dynamic equivalence should always have priority over the formal correspondence. A correct translation will not be measured in terms of whether the words are understandable and the sentences grammatically correct, but in terms of the *total impact* of the message has on the reader of the translation. We can assess that a translation is correct if the receiver reacts in the same way as the reader of the source text. Thus, the main criterion of a correct translation is the impact the message has on the reader of the translation. The translated text is supposed to carry out exactly the same functions as the source text. To make his translation readable and acceptable, the translator is asked to pass the source text through the cultural filter of the host culture. The main criteria of a good translation are: fluency, transparency, readability and natural-sounding.

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### Limits of the Interpretative & Socio-linguistic Approach

We mentioned earlier that the interpretative approach was mainly developed from the practice of *Conference Interpreting*. So it deals with *oral language* rather than *written language*. This approach could be relevant to oral speech where *texts* are communicative (they contain information to be transmitted). However, there are some other kinds of texts (expressive texts: poetry, literature, etc.) where language is important (the importance of the aesthetic features of language). In these types of texts, the form and the content are inseparable, and the act of *deverbalization* leads inevitably to the distortion (deformation) of the ST.

Translating according to the sociolinguistic and functionalist approach is qualified by the supporters of the “Literal and Poetic Approach” as an Ethnocentric strategy that tries to level the differences existing in the “**Other**” text according to the mold of the target culture (One of the *Scandals* of Translation!! Venuti). It is a translation approach that cares most about the readability and the acceptability of the translated text by the receiver in the target culture.

### When Literality rhymes with “*Decentrality*” Antoine Berman and the “negative analysis” of translation

Berman believes that translation tends to reduce differences through thirteen “deforming tendencies” which could be summarized as follows:

- 1- Rationalization: introducing modifications on the syntactic structure of the ST. By structure, Berman means; punctuation, order of sentences, logical links, etc.
- 2- Clarification: making explicit what is implicit in the ST. A translation always tends to be clearer than the original.
- 3- Expansion: a consequence of the two previous tendencies; and it was early mentioned by Vinay and Darbelnet. Because of “overtranslation” and explicitation, the TTs tend to be longer than STs.
- 4- Ennoblement: It refers to the fact that some translators tend to introduce some esthetic features on their translations by using an elegant style, which was the case of “*les belles infidèles*”, or the unfaithful beautiful.
- 5- Qualitative impoverishment: to replace words and expressions used in the ST by some equivalents in the TT which don't show the same richness and significance. Berman gives some examples when the form and the sound of a term are associated with its meaning.
- 6- Quantitative impoverishment: this includes the fact of losing lexical variation in the TT. Berman gives the example of the Spanish ST that uses three different synonyms for “face” (*semblante, rostro and cara*). Rendering all these three words by *face* would give way to a qualitative impoverishment of the ST.
- 7- Homogenization: it consists of unifying the tissue of the ST at all levels, whereas it is heterogeneous. It is actually the consequence of all the previous tendencies.
- 8- The destruction of rhythms: rhythm doesn't concern poetry only; other types of works, like sacred texts (Quran), novels, Arabic *makama* are also full of this feature which tend to be destroyed through deformation of word order and punctuation.



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9- The destruction of underlying networks of signification: the word *text* comes from *textile* (fibres that form a tissue!). The qualified translator is expected to be aware of the existence of the network of words forming the text. Berman give an example of argumentative suffixes in a Latin American Text - *jaulón* (large cage), *portón* (large door), etc.

10- The destruction of linguistic patternings: to render sentences constructed in a systematic way in an “asystematic” construction. The techniques of translation adopted by the translator (such as rationalization, clarification and expansion) tend to give a “standardized” translation which destroys the linguistic patterns of the S.T.

11- The exoticization (destruction of vernacular networks): Novelists often use colloquial language in their writings: local speech, slang, and vernacular. Translators tend either to omit these expressions or to exoticizing them by putting them in italics. On the other hand, seeking a Target Language vernacular would be a form of exoticizing the foreign.

12- The destruction of expressions and idioms: replacing an idiomatic expression or proverb by its equivalent in the target text would be the consecration of an ethnocentric translation. By doing so, the translator would create new references and destroy the foreign work.

13- The effacement of the superimposition of languages: Two languages (or more) may co-exist in the source text. These may be Arabic dialect in Maghreb countries, used by some novelists, which is actually a mix of Arabic, French and Berber. Translators tend to erase traces of

such a *mixture* by using a uniformed language. Actually, this is the main issue when translating novels.

According to Berman, the previous deforming tendencies (mainly *Ethnocentrism and Hypertextuality*) characterized the translating process in all dominant civilizations (from Rome of Saint Jérôme to modern times, passing through Arab civilization).

The ethnocentric translation was born in Rome. From its beginning, the Roman culture was translation-based. After the period when Latin authors used Greek, they started to translate into Latin all Greek texts. It was an enterprise of massive translation carried out through systematic annexation of texts. It was a process of *Latinization*. (Berman 1999: 31).

Berman believes that these principles of translation (ethnocentrism, hypertextuality, annexation, etc.) are deeply rooted in Greco-Roman culture. This way of perceiving and assessing the translating process started actually with Plato (428-348 BC) who introduced the concept of separation, and opposition, between the “Body” and the “Soul”; the “body = the form” that kills; and the “soul = meaning” that gives life.

The concept of valorizing the foreign through literal translation, introduced by Berman, was early evoked and discussed by the German Romantics of the early nineteenth century. Some monumental figures, such as Humboldt, Schlegel, Schleiermacher and mainly

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Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) highly influenced the Bermanian concepts.

### **Walter Benjamin and “The Task of the translator”**

In his essay titled “The task of the translator” (1923), which has become one of the references that constitute a must in literary translation, Benjamin believes that the goal of any translation is not to convey the “meaning” or “information” contained in the ST. A translation is supposed to emerge from the ST in order to exist separately and to give it a “continued life”. It is a sort of recreation that will give a chance to the ST to survive through times. The “task of the translator” is not to focus on the ST nor on the TT but to pay attention at a higher level: at “*The Pure language*”. Benjamin believes that when the ST and the TT co-exist and complement each other, they give rise to the “Pure Language”. He also believes that “Literality” is the best way which leads to the Pure Language.

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language [...] to shine upon the original all the more fully. (Benjamin 2004: 81)

### **When translating rhymes with writing: Henri Meschonnic<sup>2</sup> and Poetics of Translation**

Like German Romantics, Meschonnic’s work is important because it moves translation beyond the classic concepts of formal correspondence versus dynamic equivalence, introduced by Nida, as well as beyond the linguistic considerations. I think that the best way to

surround Meschonnic's Poetics is to see how he defines translation:

Translation is no longer defined as the transport of the source text into the target literature or, inversely, the transport of the target reader into the source text (double movement, which reposes on the dualism of sense and form, which empirically characterizes most translations), but as work [314] on the language, decentering, interpoetic relation between value and signification, structuration of a subject and history (which formal postulates had separated), and no longer as meaning. This proposition postulates that the text works the language as an epistemology applying [enacte de] a knowledge-skill [savoir] inseparable from this practice and which, beyond this practice, is no longer this savoir but a signified. (Translation by Anthony Pym, published in *Target* 15(2) (2003))

These concepts of the existence of a language “in-between”, a “no man's langue”<sup>3</sup>, translation as “re-creation” and valorizing the “other” through “Decentration/Decentering”<sup>4</sup> were deeply discussed by French Scholar Henri Meschonnic (1932 - 2009). He deeply, and at length, criticized E. Nida's “Toward a Science of Translation” (1964) and “The Theory and Practice of Translation” (1969) by giving evidence that the behavioral approach (Dynamic Equivalence), valid for “*Christianizing*” the recipients, is never valid for translating literature. His “Propositions for a poetics of translation”, published in 1973, state that the subject of

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literary translation is not the form (esthetic features), nor the meaning. It is something situated beyond all the material aspects. Quoting Valery Larbaud, Meschonnic writes:

Each text has a its own sound, its own color, its own movement, its own atmosphere. Beyond its material and literal meaning, each piece of literature, like each piece of music, has a non-apparent meaning that creates the esthetic impression wanted by the poet. It is exactly this meaning that the translator is supposed to convey, and this should be the only task of the translator. (Henri Meschonnic 1973: 352).

Like the German romantics, Meschonnic believes in the existence of a “third language” between the ST and the TT. He also believes that “Literality” could be the best strategy to valorize the foreign and to enrich one’s language and one’s culture.

V. Larbaud shows that borrowing provide the “foreignizing conditions”, searched by Aristotle, which enrich incontestably languages into which they are introduced. (ibid: 356).

Like Berman and the German Romantics, Meschonnic considers that what constitutes the norms of success of a translation within the Greco-Roman culture (naturalness, fluency, acceptability, readability, transparency, etc.) is no more than a sort of deformation and distortion of the real project of translating.

As for the concept of decentering, this is defined by Meschonnic as:

Decentering is a textual relation between two texts in two language-cultures, [it extends] right to the linguistic structure of the language-system, this linguistic structure becoming value within the system of the text. Annexation [annexion] is the effacing of this relation, an illusion of the natural, the as-if, as if the source-language text were written in the target language, overlooking the differences in culture, in period and in linguistic structure. A text is at a distance: one shows it, or one hides it. Neither import nor export. (Translation by Anthony Pym, published in *Target* 15(2) (2003))

The etymological meaning of Greek word “poiesis” is creation; and it is exactly this meaning which is attributed by Meschonnic to the word “Poetics”. According to him, Language is no more than a mediation between the world and oneself. From this point of view, each piece of literature (either poetry or prose) is an interaction between language and one’s own experience in life. The translator would reach the “unspeakable” not through exposing the latent aspects of the “poem” but through an act of creation.

Rhythm is a notion of a very high importance in Meschonnic’s philosophy because it constitutes the framework of any “poetic” work. He believes that a good translation should be able to re-create not what the words say (the meaning), but what the words do. A good and acceptable translation should inscribe itself in its relevant historicity and

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make the difference within a specific context, exactly as the original did.

### **In Conclusion**

In view of the previous approaches, we notice that there is no unanimous opinion among theorists on norms for translating literary texts. However, what they have in common is they all consider literature as a “genre” apart. It is actually a complex and dynamic system that requires permanent interaction and complementarity between theory and practice. They also agree on the existence of some extra-textual elements, let’s say “norms”, that should guide the translating process to achieve a specific goal.

Even expressed differently, according to the field of interest of every theorist, these norms could easily be categorized within the classical framework of translation studies: source-oriented (overt translation; foreignizing strategy) versus target-oriented (covert-translation; domesticating strategy). However, we notice the emergence of a third tendency which extract and situate the norms of literary translation “in-between” the two categories. This categorization is displayed in table below:

<b>Source oriented norms</b>	<b>“In-between” Norms</b>	<b>Target-oriented norms</b>
The successful translation should: 1- Preserve all the specificities of the source text. 2- Give the chance to the	The successful translation should: 1- not be source-	The successful translation should: 1- be intelligible and understandable

<p>readers of the translation to discover new texts, written in different style and even to discover new genres of literature. 3- Carries the reader to the text (not the text to the reader).</p> <p><u>Relevant Concepts</u> : Otherness; Foreignization; Decentrality/Decentering; Alterity; Hybridity, etc.</p>	<p>oriented nor target-oriented. 2- be a re-creation: translating a poem requires the competences of a poet; translating a novel requires the skills of a novelist, etc. 3- require a competent translator: an artistic work is not necessarily intended to someone; it requires an artist to be translated.</p> <p><u>Relevant concepts</u>: Re-creation; in-between; Pure-language; Poetics; no-man's langue, etc.</p>	<p>by the reader. 2- adapt itself with the socio-cultural mold of the target environment through equivalence. 3- put the emphasis on the recipient: carries the source text to the reader through adaptation, explanation, omission, addition, etc.</p> <p><u>Relevant concepts</u>: Fluency; Transparency; Readability; Naturalness; legibility; etc.</p>
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### **Footnotes**

1- By “translatable” I mean texts judged worth to be translated.

2- Contrary to Antoine Berman, who influenced some American scholars like Lawrence Venuti, Henri Meschonnic (1932-2009) is almost unknown figure in the Anglophone world. He is a French poet, linguist, and translator. He has authored several texts about translation, only one of which has been translated into English: *Ethics and Politics of Translating* (2011).

3- The expression is from Michel Ballard’s “théorèmes pour la traduction”.

4- In his translation of Meschonnic’s texts after he passed away in 2009, Antony Pym uses the word “Decentering”.

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