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LOST IN TRANSLATION: WHAT THE FIRST LINE OF "THE STRANGER" SHOULD BE

POSTED BY RYAN BLOOM

For the modern American reader, few lines in French literature are as famous as the opening of Albert Camus's "L'Étranger": "*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.*" Nitty-gritty tense issues aside, the first sentence of "The Stranger" is so elementary that even a schoolboy with a base knowledge of French could adequately translate it. So why do the pros keep getting it wrong?

Within the novel's first sentence, two subtle and seemingly minor translation decisions have the power to change the way we read everything that follows. What makes these particular choices prickly is that they poke at a long-standing debate among the literary community: whether it is necessary for a translator to have some sort of special affinity with a work's author in order to produce the best possible text.

Arthur Goldhammer, translator of a volume of Camus's *Combat* editorials, calls it "nonsense" to believe that "good translation requires some sort of mystical sympathy between author and translator." While "mystical" may indeed be a bit of a stretch, it's hard to look at Camus's famous first sentence—whether translated by Stuart Gilbert, Joseph Laredo, Kate Griffith, or even, to a lesser degree, Matthew Ward—without thinking that a little more understanding between author and translator may have prevented the text from being colored in ways that Camus never intended.

Stuart Gilbert, a British scholar and a friend of James Joyce, was the first person to attempt Camus's "L'Étranger" in English. In 1946, Gilbert translated the book's title as "The Outsider" and rendered the first line as "Mother died today." Simple, succinct, and incorrect.

In 1982, both Joseph Laredo and Kate Griffith produced new translations of "L'Étranger," each opting for Gilbert's revised title, "The Stranger," but preserving his first line. "Mother died today" remained, and it wasn't until 1988 that the line saw a single word changed. It was then that American translator and poet Matthew Ward reverted "Mother" back to *Maman*. One word? What's the big deal? A large part of how we view and—alongside the novel's court—ultimately judge Meursault lies in our perception of his relationship with his mother. We condemn or set him free based not on the crime he commits but on our assessment of him as a person. Does he love his mother? Or is he cold toward her, uncaring, even?

First impressions matter, and, for forty-two years, the way that American readers were introduced to Meursault was through the detached formality of his statement: "Mother died today." There is little warmth, little bond or closeness or love in "Mother," which is a static, archetypal term, not the sort of thing we use for a living, breathing being with whom we have close relations. To do so would be like calling the family dog "Dog" or a husband "Husband." The word forces us to see Meursault as distant from the woman who bore him.

What if the opening line had read, "Mommy died today"? How would we have seen Meursault then? Likely, our first impression would have been of a child speaking. Rather than being put off, we would have felt pity or sympathy. But this, too, would have presented an inaccurate view of Meursault. The truth is that neither of these translations—"Mother" or "Mommy"—ring true to the original. The French word *maman* hangs somewhere between the two extremes: it's neither the cold and distant "mother" nor the overly childlike "mommy." In English, "mom" might seem the closest fit for Camus's sentence, but there's still something off-putting and abrupt about the single-syllable word; the two-syllable *maman* has a touch of softness and warmth that is lost with "mom."

So how is the English-language translator to avoid unnecessarily influencing the reader? It seems that Matthew Ward, the novel's most recent translator, did the only logical thing: nothing. He left Camus's word untouched, rendering the famous first line, "Maman died today." It could be said that Ward introduces a new problem: now, right from the start, the American reader is faced with a foreign term, with a confusion not previously present. Ward's translation is clever, though, and three reasons demonstrate why his is the best solution.

First, the French word *maman* is familiar enough for an English-language reader to parse. Around the globe, as children learn to form words by babbling, they begin with the simplest sounds. In many languages, bilabials such as "m," "p," and "b," as well as the low vowel "a," are among the easiest to produce. As a result, in English, we find that children initially refer to the female parent as "mama." Even in a language as seemingly different as Mandarin Chinese, we find *māma;* in the languages of Southern India we get *amma*, and in Norwegian, Italian, Swedish, and Icelandic, as well as many other languages, the word used is "mamma." The French *maman* is so similar that the English-language reader will effortlessly understand it.

As the years pass, new generations of American readers, who often first encounter Camus's book in high school, grow more and more removed from the novel's historical context. Utilizing the original French word in the first sentence rather than any of the English options also serves to remind readers that they are in fact entering a world different from their own. While this hint may not be enough to inform the younger reader that, for example, the likelihood of a Frenchman in colonial Algeria getting the death penalty for killing an armed Arab was slim to nonexistent, at least it provides an initial allusion to these extra-textual facts.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the American reader will harbor no preconceived notions of the word *maman.* We will understand it with ease, but it will carry no baggage, it will plant no unintended seeds in our head. The word will neither sway us to see Meursault as overly cold and heartless nor as overly warm and loving. And while some of the word's precision is indeed lost for the English-language reader, *maman* still gives us a more neutral-to-familiar tone than "mother," one that hews closer to Camus's original.

So if Matthew Ward finally corrected the mother problem, what exactly has he, and the other translators, gotten wrong? Writing of "The Stranger" 's first line in the *Guardian*, Guy Dammann says, "Some openers are so prescient that they seem to burn a hole through the rest of the book, the semantic resonance recurring with the persistence of the first theme in Beethoven's fifth symphony."

The linguistic fluency of any good translator tells them that, syntactically, "*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte*," is not the most fluid English sentence. So rather than the more literal translation, "Today, Mother has died," we get, "Mother died today," which is the smoother, more natural rendering. But the question is: In changing the sentence's syntax, are we also changing its logic, its "mystical" deeper meaning?

The answer is a resounding *oui*!

Rendering the line as "Mother died today" completely neglects a specific ordering of ideas that offer insight into Meursault's inner psyche. Throughout the course of the novel, the reader comes to see that Meursault is a character who, first and foremost, lives for the moment. He does not consciously dwell on the past; he does not worry about the future. What matters is today. The single most important factor of his being is right now.

Not far behind, though, is Maman. Reflective of Camus's life, Meursault shares a unique relationship with his mother, due in part to her inability to communicate (Camus's own mother was illiterate, partially deaf, and had trouble speaking). Both Camus and Meursault yearn for Maman, for her happiness and love, but find the expression of these emotions difficult. Rather than distancing mother from son, though, this tension puts Maman at the center of her son's life. As the book opens, the loss of Maman places her between Meursault's ability to live for today and his recognition of a time when there will no longer be a today.

This loss drives the action of the novel, leading inexorably to the end, the final period, the thing that hangs over all else: death. Early in the book, Camus links the death of Meursault's mother with the oppressive, ever-present sun, so that when we get to the climactic beach scene, we see the symbolism: sun equals loss of mother, sun causes Meursault to pull the trigger. In case we don't get it, though, Camus makes the connection explicit, writing, "It was the same sun as on the day I buried Maman and, like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all of the veins pulsating together beneath the skin." As the trigger gives way, so, too, does today, the beginning—through the loss of Maman—succumb to death, the end.

The ordering of words in Camus's first sentence is no accident: today is interrupted by Maman's death. The sentence, the one we have yet to see correctly rendered in an English translation of "L'Étranger," should read: "Today, Maman died."

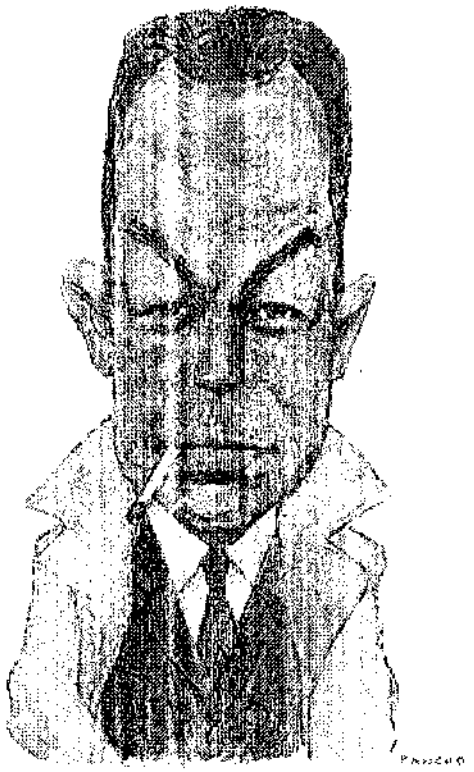
Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum.

A New 'L'Étranger'

Claire Messud
JUNE 5, 2014 ISSUE

The Outsider
by Albert Camus, translated from the French by Sandra Smith
London: Penguin, 128 pp., £7.99 (paper)

One of the most widely read French novels of the twentieth century, Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*, carries, for American readers, enormous significance in our cultural understanding of midcentury French identity. It is considered—to what would have been Camus's irritation—the exemplary existentialist novel.



Albert Camus; drawing by Pancho

Yet most readers on this continent (and indeed, most of Camus's readers worldwide) approach him not directly, but in translation. For many years, Stuart Gilbert's 1946 version was the standard English text. In the 1980s, it was supplanted by two new translations—by Joseph Laredo in the UK and Commonwealth, and by Matthew Ward in the US. Ward's highly respected version rendered the idiom of the novel more contemporary and more American, and an examination of his choices reveals considerable thoughtfulness and intuition.

Each translation is, perforce, a reenvisioning of the novel: a translator will determine which Meursault we encounter, and in what light we understand him. Sandra Smith—an American scholar and translator at Cambridge University, whose previous work includes the acclaimed translation of Irène Némirovsky's *Suite Française*—published in the UK in 2012 an excellent and, in important ways, new version of *L'Étranger*.

To begin with, she has changed the book's English title: no longer *The Stranger*, Smith's version is called, rather, *The Outsider*. She explains in her introduction:

> In French, *étranger* can be translated as "outsider," "stranger" or "foreigner." Our protagonist, Meursault, is all three, and the concept of an outsider encapsulates all these possible meanings: Meursault is a stranger to himself, an outsider to society and a foreigner because he is a Frenchman in Algeria.

Then, too, Smith has reconsidered the book's famous opening. Camus's original is deceptively simple: "*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.*" Gilbert influenced generations by offering us "Mother died today"—inscribing in Meursault from the outset a formality that could be construed as heartlessness. But *maman*, after all, is intimate and affectionate, a child's name for his mother. Matthew Ward concluded that it was essentially untranslatable ("mom" or "mummy" being not quite apt), and left it in the original French: "Maman died today." There is a clear logic in this choice; but as Smith has explained, in an interview in *The Guardian*, *maman* "didn't really tell the reader anything about the connotation." She, instead, has translated the sentence as "My mother died today."

> I chose "My mother" because I thought about how someone would tell another person that his mother had died. Meursault is speaking to the reader directly. "My mother died today" seemed to me the way it would work, and also implied the closeness of "maman" you get in the French.

Elsewhere in the book, she has translated *maman* as "mama"—again, striving to come as close as possible to an actual, colloquial word that will carry the same connotations as *maman* does in French.

Smith has made a similarly considered choice when confronted, later in the novel, with the ever-ticklish French contrast between *vous* and *tu*. Central to the novel's plot is Meursault's burgeoning friendship with his unsavory neighbor, Raymond Sintès, a friendship that develops as a result of Sintès's interest rather than Meursault's. In the course of a long conversation, Meursault recalls:

> *Je ne me suis pas aperçu d'abord qu'il me tutoyait. C'est seulement quand il m'a declaré, "Maintenant, tu es un vrai copain," que cela m'a frappé.... Cela m'était égal d'être son copain et il avait vraiment l'air d'en avoir envie.*

Ward's translation is as follows:

> I didn't notice at first, but he had stopped calling me "monsieur." It was only when he announced "Now you're a pal, Meursault" and said it again that it struck me.... I didn't mind being his pal, and he seemed set on it.

This is a rather curious choice: to replace the *tu/vous* distinction with, in English, a reference to the address *monsieur*—which appears in French in the English. It suggests that an Anglophone reader will understand that, while saying "Mister" or "Sir" in English isn't quite comparable to the formalities of the French, we can infer, from the supposedly retained (but actually inserted) French, the nature of Sintès's forwardness. In other words, Ward is presuming upon an English reader's cultural fantasy of Frenchness.

Smith's translation is much more straightforward:

> At first I didn't realize he'd started addressing me in a very personal way. It only struck me when he said: "Now, we're really pals." ...It didn't

> matter to me one way or the other whether we were friends or not, but it really seemed to matter to him.

When I read this, I understood at once that Smith was referring to the *tu/vous* difference—as would any reader with even a minimal knowledge of French—but even without that knowledge, the passage makes perfect sense.

Again, with the last sentence of this quotation, Smith's translation differs tellingly from Ward's. I myself would have been tempted to translate it in yet a different way: "It was all the same to me to be his friend, and he really seemed to want it." Smith's translation is unquestionably more elegant than mine; but it also comes closer to the French than Ward's does. This amounts to a matter of characterization, both of Meursault and of Sintès: in Camus's formulation, we understand that Meursault's attitude is chiefly complaisant. Sintès has a strong desire for friendship; Meursault, far from being cold, senses that strong desire and, having no contrary desire of his own, is willing to go along.

Ward's translation implies something more like obdurate determination on Sintès's part—"he seemed set on it"; whereas the French *envie*, meaning "desire," suggests an almost importunate element. It certainly implies something close to compassion on Meursault's part. Smith's translation, while somewhat more oblique than "he really seemed to want it," nevertheless crucially conveys the extent of Meursault's accommodating nature: having truly no opinion, he will not pretend to one; and may as well, at that point, accede to Sintès.

Smith is throughout attuned to such subtleties. She has a precise literary understanding of Camus's creations, and her Meursault emerges, in the crisp clarity of her prose, emphatically not as a monster, but as a man who will not embellish or elaborate. His insufficient demonstration of emotion at his mother's funeral and the fact that he does not believe in God will count for much in his condemnation to death by the court; but we are not to understand thereby that Meursault is unfeeling or heartless. He is, rather, painfully without pretense.

Consider the moment when Marie, Meursault's girlfriend, asks him if he loves her: "I told her that didn't mean anything, but I didn't think so." This unsettling frankness is not willfully hurtful; it is simply the truth. "She looked sad then. But while we were making lunch, she laughed again, for no apparent reason, and the way she laughed made me kiss her."

The emotions of this exchange are repeated a thousand times a day in domestic relationships, but they are not usually this openly expressed. The telling difference, in Meursault, is that he eschews pretense, and proves almost idiotic—or perversely noble—in his transparency. Smith's translation portrays him thus, granting him kinship with the likes of Prince Myshkin—albeit as the black sheep of the family.

Camus famously said that "Meursault is the only Christ that we deserve"—a complicated statement for an avowed atheist. But Camus, of course, was more complex in his atheism than we might commonly expect: he was an atheist in reaction to, and in the shadow of, a Catholicism osmotically imbued in the culture (of the French certainly, but of the *pieds noirs* in particular). The inescapable result is that his atheism is in constant dialogue with religion; in *L'Étranger* no less than in, say, *La Peste*.

Sandra Smith has, in her admirable translation, plucked carefully upon this thread in the novel, so that Anglophone readers might better grasp Camus's allusions. Here is but one key example: the novel's last line, in French, begins "*Pour que tout soit consommé,...*" which Ward translates, literally, as "For everything to be consummated." But as Smith points out, the French carries "an echo of the last words of Jesus on the Cross: '*Tout est consommé.*'" Her chosen rendition, then, is "So that it might be finished," a formulation that echoes Christ's last words in the King James translation of the Bible.

Translation is inevitably to a degree subjective. The quality of a translator will depend, then, not merely on her understanding of the mechanics of a language, or on her facility as a writer of prose, but also on her capacities as a reader of texts, her sense of subtext, of connotation, of allusion—of the invisible textures that give a narrative its density and, ultimately, shape its significance. Sandra Smith is a very fine translator indeed.

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Op-Ed

Obama, Romney and the many misinterpretations of Albert Camus

The opening lines of his book, 'The Stranger,' are famous -- and even a bit problematic?

June 10, 2012 | By John Kenney

For the modern American reader, few lines in French literature are as famous as the opening of Albert Camus's "L'Étranger": "*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.*" Nitty-gritty tense issues aside, the first sentence of "The Stranger" is so elementary that even a schoolboy with a base knowledge of French could adequately translate it. So why do the pros keep getting it wrong?

—Ryan Bloom, newyorker.com

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President Obama today weighed in on the translation of Algerian-born French writer, Albert Camus' seminal work, "The Stranger." The president announced that "like most Americans, the first sentence of 'The Stranger' has never quite seemed right to me." After consulting with the French ambassador to the United States, NATO, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a schoolboy with a basic knowledge of French, the president said in a news conference that he was confident the line should be read this way: "Our understanding is that Mother may have passed away today, though it might have happened yesterday. I think it would be foolish to judge what happened before the facts are in. Obviously we mourn the loss. We find solace in her memory. Critics of Mother, including my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, have said Mother may not have died, that she was merely quite ill, and that her illness, while tragic, is another example of the cost of healthcare in this country. Fortunately she was French and covered by that system."

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Republican presidential front-runner Mitt Romney, who spent time in France as a missionary, angrily disagreed with Obama's translation of the first sentence in Albert Camus' novel "The Stranger." Romney, speaking to a group of schoolboys with a limited knowledge of French and no understanding of who Albert Camus was, said, "Did Mother die today? The president says she did. How can we know for sure? Besides an autopsy report from the French police and her son as eyewitness, all of which we learn about later in the novel, we have no proof of her death, any more than we do of global warming.... Look ... look ... the question isn't whether Mother died today. For all we know it could have been yesterday ... or maybe she's not dead, maybe she's lost.... Old people get confused sometimes. The word for lost in French is perdu ... like the chicken ... funny.... The point is that I agree with capital punishment, even for elderly French mothers, and by agree I mean disagree if I have to, depending on the day, the hour or the minute, or whether there's a French person in the room. Any French people here today?"

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Fox News host Megyn Kelly said that President Obama's recent translation of the first sentence of Albert Camus' novel "The Stranger" was yet another example of how out of touch he was with the American people and L'Académie Française. Kelly said she sat down with a French dictionary and a bottle of white burgundy and found a "fair and balanced" translation of the sentence. Kelly read the sentence on air, surrounded by schoolboys who spoke no French, only Spanish. "Mother died today as a result of President Obama's death panels, proving once again that 'Obamacare' — and this president personally — will idly stand by as millions of elderly people die needlessly, be they French or otherwise."

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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran, spoke at the United Nations today, announcing a new Farsi translation of "The Stranger" by Albert Camus. Ahmadinejad, speaking to a largely empty General Assembly, said that the proper translation should read as follows: "If Mother died yesterday — and there is no proof of this — it was most likely a Zionist plot, and why is he a 'stranger' just because he has no feelings or feelings that are 'aberrant' or 'bizarre' or not 'founded in reality.' Little bunnies, little bunnies, look how they run.... Did you not see them?"

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Israel reacted angrily today to Ahmadinejad's translation of Camus' "The Stranger." Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying the Iranian leader "has once again shown his delusional nature and complete ignorance of Camus' oeuvre. Even someone with no knowledge of ancient Aramaic knows that the sentence should read 'Mother didn't die today. She said she thought she might as well be dead since no one ever called her.'"

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In a surprise move, JP Morgan Chase announced it has made a new translation of Camus' "The Stranger." The translation, read by CEO Jamie Dimon at a Senate hearing, is as follows: "Mother did not die, she was merely misplaced. Lost actually. We've lost upward of 2 billion mothers, and that number could go up. These things happen, and to regulate mothers and their lives is, to me and anyone with a brain, foolish, and if you don't get that, maybe you should get lost."

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The New York Post reported today that the correct translation of the opening sentence of Albert Camus' book "The Stranger" should read: "Algerian mother killed by son in brutal murder; French police are holding Dominique Strauss-Kahnfor questioning."

John Kenney's first novel, "Truth in Advertising," will be published this fall.