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## Lost in Translation: What the First Line of “The Stranger” Should Be



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.”

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