

On translating Camus (excerpts)

Sandra Smith, author of Penguin's latest version of *The Outsider*, answers questions about how she took *L'Etranger* into English

Why do you think Camus endures so well?

Camus endures for several reasons. Firstly, he writes beautifully, mixing literary skill and philosophical ideas seamlessly. People can relate to his work on so many levels. He is very human and his politics are the politics of peace. There is a little-known work by him called "Lettres à un ami allemand" (Letters to a German Friend) written during the Occupation which are a brilliant mixture of history, sociology, politics and literature. Camus demonstrates his love for life in all his works, despite [the Absurd](#) and all the negative aspects of this world. He has faith in the basic goodness of people. He is an optimist – whereas Sartre was such a pessimist!

When did you first read *The Outsider*, and how did it strike you then?

Following on from that, what happened to your opinions of the book as you worked on the translation? Did they alter at all?

I read *L'Etranger* many years ago as a student and immediately wanted to know more about Camus, so read more. He was my idol! I just loved the way he wrote. As I translated the book, I appreciated even more the enormous skill that went into it. The language is simple in the extreme but the symbolism and underlying philosophical ideas quite complex.

You listened to a recording of Camus reading *The Outsider* as well as working with the text while you worked on the translation. What difference did this make?

I was very excited when I discovered that the [Librairie sonore in Paris](#) had released a recording of Camus reading the entire book on French radio so immediately ordered the CDs. I listened to his reading and tried to translate with his intonation, pauses, breath, emphases, et cetera in mind. It was very helpful.

In relation to this idea, a contributor called Daveportivo also asked:

"In literature or any writing, I feel maintaining and manipulating a pace is crucial to an author's tone and also the way readers will react to a whole range of revelations or actions. I love the way well-constructed pieces can have you singing to the author's tune or dancing to his rhythm, and it leads me to wonder how you maintain or reflect this in a translation. Meaning can vary dramatically enough when translating, but with syntactical differences and (I imagine) considerable variation in syllable count I imagine it must be very difficult to echo Camus' flow. To use my school French as an example, *Bonsoir* and *Good Evening* have very different feels both on the tongue and within a sentence. Anyway, *The Outsider* (this version) had a very particular sense of flow and I'm always curious whether the content/meaning of the sentences simply serves to define Camus' style and the rhythm of the narrator's voice, or whether switching the nuts and bolts of one language for another turns this on its head."

Sandra Smith answered:

You have put your finger on the main issue of translation! There is no one answer, unfortunately, but I can say that I feel that translation is basically a subjective

process. When I read something, my personal response to it influences how I translate. In this work, I listened to Camus' reading and also tried to imitate the terse style of Meursault that contrasted to the lyrical style used when describing nature. Also, the style of Part II is very different from Part I, with much more analysis and longer sentences, so it was important to transpose that into English.

Can you explain your Maman/Mother strategy to our readers? There's been a lot of debate about how to translate the famous first sentence and Mersault's subsequent references to Maman in the reading group this month.

When I first got the contract and told people, the first thing everyone asked was "How will you translate the first sentence?" It was a real challenge because most translators used "Mother", which I found did not get across the close relationship that "maman" implies in French. One translator left the word in French, which didn't really tell the reader anything about the connotation. 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. Afterwards, I used "mama", partly because it sounds like "maman" and partly because I was aware that a British audience would probably prefer "Mum" and an American reader "Mom" so I needed something that worked on both sides of the Atlantic.

Related to this question, Derekenfrance also wrote:

"I've a question for Ms. Smith about how she has translated the opening sentence of L'Étranger. In the French, one reads "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte." She has chosen to translate this as "My mother died today." While much of the commentary about this sentence has focused on Ms Smith's decision to include the possessive pronoun "My", I'd like to focus on the placement of the word "today". She has followed the majority of the translators (if not all?) by putting "today" at the end of the sentence, even though in the French it is found as the first word of the book. I'm sure she made this decision consciously, and I'd like to ask why."

Sandra Smith answered:

In French, the emphasis often comes at the end of the sentence while in English it is at the beginning. I felt that "Today my mother died" sounded awkward and did not give the proper stress.

A follow up question also came from CamusSociety, who asked "why the narrator chose to start off with an announcement that his mother died today (or today his mother died) only to immediately cast doubt on this fact."

Sandra Smith answered:

The doubt indicates he is not in constant contact with his mother and also that the old people's home chose to send him an impersonal telegram to announce her death. I feel Meursault is quite shocked when he reads this.