

‘Maman’ or ‘Mother’: A Closer Look at Word Choice in Translations of Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger*

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Abstract

When the topic of French literature comes up, Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger* is one of the first novels that comes to mind. As one of the most translated novels worldwide, *L’Étranger* has global reach and continues to be one of the most influential French novels on the absurd. In translation, one of the key issues has to do with the translator’s word and language choice. A controversial, and often discussed, example is the first sentence of the novel. The first sentence has the ability to shape, and even change, the reader’s perspective. By analyzing and comparing Camus’ original French text to Stuart Gilbert and Matthew Ward’s respective English translations, we see how Gilbert and Ward’s choice of “Mother” versus “Maman” has an affect on the reader’s perception of the main character Meursault. Inspired by Venuti’s idea of the translator’s invisibility, by bringing the focus to the translator’s decision, we better understand why each translator selected a different word in translation. Acknowledging Gilbert and Ward’s role as a translator within the text provides a more active and inclusive voice that justifies their decisions instead of ignoring them. The reader then understands how Meursault is read differently across the three versions.

Keywords: *L’Étranger*, The Stranger, Albert Camus, Stuart Gilbert, Matthew Ward, French, English, Invisibility, Word Choice

What impact does one word have within a sentence? Not only does it affect translations and the texts itself, but its impact can also change perceptions of

characters from the text. The effects of one word can be seen in Albert Camus' classic French novel *L'Étranger*, also known as *The Stranger* or *The Outsider* as translated into English. Already, there exists controversy surrounding translations of Camus' novel into English. There have been numerous English translations over the years, but this paper will be focusing on a comparison between the Stuart Gilbert and Matthew Ward translation of Camus' original. As the first English translation, the Stuart Gilbert version was initially seen as the benchmark for English translations of the novel. Now, more recent and contemporary articles and research papers have criticized the Gilbert translation for being dated and inaccurate. In comparison, the Matthew Ward translation is currently seen as the preferred edition. It is important to note that time likely plays a role, considering the Gilbert version was published in 1946 and the Ward version was published over forty years later in 1989. The reason for comparing these two translations is to see how not only time plays a factor, but how country of origin can as well. Stuart Gilbert is British while Matthew Ward is American, which affects the translator's language and word choice. It is also noted that Camus was influenced by American literature and literary techniques, (Kaplansky 4) which suggests that Ward's translation may be preferable due to his nationality and writing technique. Using these two translations of *L'Étranger*, I will be focusing on the opening paragraph, specifically the first sentence, of the novel and how this passage shapes the reader's perception of the main character Meursault throughout the rest of the novel. Because the passage deals with the relationship between Meursault and his mother, it is key in shaping his character due to the topic. As the main source of controversy, the first passage of the novel differs across translations but there is one word in particular that is the point of interest: 'Maman.' A seemingly simple

word to translate from French into English, 'Maman' means 'Mother' in a literal translation. There is more meaning behind the expression than a simple word-to-word translation of the word. The decision to either domesticate or foreignize in translation has an impact on how the reader views the relationship between Meursault and his mother.

The theme of 'lost and found in translation' can be applied to the Gilbert and Ward translations of *L'Étranger* because translations often lose meaning from the original. It is nearly impossible to fully capture one language's idiosyncrasies. Meursault is a character read as indifferent and emotionally detached from his surroundings. Only, is this due to the translations or how Camus wrote the character? (Bloom) The opening line and subsequent passages differ between the English translations, which affects how the reader perceives his character after Meursault's initial reaction to his mother's death. This idea of comparing the Gilbert and Ward translation is inspired by Ryan Bloom's New Yorker article *Lost in Translation: What the First Line of "The Stranger" Should Be*. In the Gilbert translation, Meursault comes across as distant because he refers to his Mom as 'Mother.' In contrast, the Ward translation does not change the French 'Maman.' The result of leaving the French word in is that Meursault appears to be closer to his mom through the affectionate word choice. Perhaps in Camus' version there is a more emotional side to Meursault that is lost, in the Gilbert translation and to a certain degree, re-found, in the Ward translation.

Opening Paragraph: A Visual Comparison

The decision to focus on the opening passage is because it introduces Meursault's relationship with his mother. This relationship becomes important later on in the

novel when Meursault’s thoughts return to his mother before his own death. Although she does not make an appearance in the novel, Meursault’s mother does have an impact on his character development. In order to frame the paper and provide readers with context, here is a chart that compares the opening paragraph of *L’Étranger* in Camus’ original French version and the two English versions from Gilbert and Ward:

Albert Camus	Stuart Gilbert	Matthew Ward
<p>“Aujourd’hui, Maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J’ai reçu un télégramme de l’asile : << Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués.>> Cela ne veut rien dire. C’était peut-être hier.” (Camus 7)</p>	<p>“Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure. The telegram from the Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.” (Gilbert 4)</p>	<p>“Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: “Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.” That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.” (Ward 3)</p>

In Jonathan Kaplansky’s paper ‘Outside *The Stranger*? English Retranslations of Camus’ *L’Étranger*’, he provides a useful overview and comparison between the various translations of the novel, including Gilbert and Ward’s versions. One

difference between the two translations exists at the paratext. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Stuart Gilbert is British while Matthew Ward is American. Initially, Gilbert's translation was titled *The Outsider* in London publications while in New York it was published under *The Stranger*. Either title choice is appropriate because "both terms convey the idea- central in the novel- of not belonging, of exclusion." (Kaplansky 3) Neither title change the meaning of the novel's plot or affect the reader's perspective.

Kaplansky also briefly describes Camus' work. He explains that "each new gesture, each new object corresponds to a new sentence. This somewhat disjointed style makes for an apparent lack of causality between Camus' sentences." (Kaplansky 4) This style is best explained by a famous Sartre metaphor, which says that "une phrase de *L'Étranger* c'est une île"; (Kaplansky 4) or as translated into English, "one sentence of *L'Étranger* is an island." It is distinct and stands alone. With this framework in mind, it is how we can interpret and analyze the translations against Camus.

In Kaplansky's article, the opposite of what Venuti calls the "translator's invisibility" exists. His aim is to examine the translations in order to "help clarify some of their [the translators'] choices and lessen their 'invisibility'." (Kaplansky 5) This is important because each translator will have some sort of a bias that affects the results of the translation.

This is not meant to suggest that either Gilbert or Ward lack proficient language fluency; instead, it is important to consider the act of translation as a recreation process that allows for the visibility of the translator, as Kaplansky suggests. The recreation of Camus' text into English will differ depending on the translator. For example, Gilbert's translation "reads as both elegant and poetic

English prose, with a distinctly British flavour. [in comparison to the source text] To suit his own prose, he confidently restructures the paragraph and sentence divisions” (Kaplansky 5). An example of the “British flavour” can be seen in the opening passage of the Gilbert translation, when he says “Which leaves the matter doubtful.” This rendition does not read close to the French original as Gilbert made the decision to target the British audience in his translation. The end result is that there is causality and a connection in his version that is absent from the French original. He notes that *L’Étranger* is “considered revolutionary in its departure from traditional narrative techniques... [the novel] is ‘domesticated’ by Gilbert, possibly in an effort to acclimatize the work to readers of English.” (Kaplansky 5) The process of domesticating a novel means that Gilbert is writing for a British audience, rather than an American audience or any other nationality. In other words, the translation undergoes a recreation process that is better suited for the intended audience, rather than maintaining a more direct and literal translation.

First Sentence

Within the first sentence alone, there are two noticeable differences across the two English translations. The first, and less controversial, difference is the sentence structure. Camus’ original text has a different structure as a traditional word-to-word translation of his version would read as “Today, Mother died.” Both Gilbert and Ward invert the sentence structure, moving ‘today’ from the beginning to the end of the sentence. It is a minor, inconsequential change. In English, either “Today, Mother died” or “Mother died today” works in terms of grammar and

flow. In French, the inverse “Maman est morte aujourd’hui.” is awkward and does not maintain the same flow.

The second point is the most popular topic of discussion in regards to Camus’ novel for decades; the translator’s choice of ‘Mother’ versus ‘Maman.’ Here, I use choice because there are several options to consider. In the Gilbert and other earlier translations of the novel, the translators opt for the word ‘Mother’. Until the publication of the Ward translation, Meursault refers to her by that name. In Ward’s translator’s note at the preface of his text, he begins “No sentence in French literature in English translation is better known than the opening sentence of *The Stranger*. It has become a sacred cow of sorts, and I have changed it” (Ward vii). He makes the conscious decision to go against the status quo by leaving the French word ‘Maman’ as the first word. Choosing to leave the foreign word in his translation has an effect on the opening line, which had been the same in English translation for over forty years.

In the justification of his choice, Ward also turns to Sartre for guidance. He refers to Meursault’s use of the word ‘Maman’ as childlike, comparable to the English ‘Mom’ but not exact. Ward says “To use the more removed, adult ‘Mother’ is, I believe, to change the nature of Meursault’s curious feeling for her. It is to change his very sensibility” (Ward vii). His critique of Gilbert’s word choice is that by using ‘Mother’, the reader’s perception of Meursault as a character changes. The relationship between him and his mother in the Gilbert translation is seen more negatively because of the emotional distance. The word ‘Mother’ is clinical and detached when used by her son. As the opening sentence of the novel, ‘Mother’ immediately sets the tone. Ultimately, there is no redemption for Meursault. Ward’s insight behind his word choice of ‘Maman’

allows the reader to be more sympathetic towards the character, as he is not as emotionally detached from his surroundings as the English reader might have once perceived. The more affectionate ‘Maman’ is a better option for a son to call his mother as there is emotional depth without the issue of sounding childish.

Ryan Bloom’s article *Lost in Translation: What the First Line of “The Stranger” Should Be* is an opinion piece for the New Yorker that discusses the two translations, plus his own position that offers yet another translation of the opening sentence. He states that:

“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.” (Bloom)

This is in reference to Gilbert’s translation. Bloom concludes that “the word [Mother] forces us to see Meursault as distant from the woman who bore him.” (Bloom) This initial impression resonates with the reader because Meursault’s relationship with his mother is the only place where his character can potentially be saved. He is indifferent towards his murder of the Arab in the desert and understands his imprisonment. One important question that Bloom raises is “how is the English-language translator to avoid unnecessarily influencing the reader?” (Bloom)

The answer is to ‘laisse faire’, or let it be. Ward makes the logical decision to leave Camus’ word alone and provides an alternative to ‘Mother.’ Although ‘Maman’ is a foreign word, Bloom backs up Ward’s argument by reasoning that it is a word “familiar enough” to the English reader that it does not distract or

confuse, while also reminding the reader of the novel's original historical context. If Gilbert domesticated his translation for a British audience, then Ward foreignized his translation through keeping 'Maman.' Most importantly, there are no preconceived implications of the word 'Maman' in English. Bloom argues that "The word [Maman] will neither sway us [the reader] to see Meursault as cold and heartless nor as overly warm and loving" (Bloom).

Ultimately, the neutrality of the word 'Maman' in an English translation provides the best solution because it does not influence the reader to either extreme. This process of foreignization is important because the implications behind "Mother" or "Mommy" are avoided. Neither of the options are appropriate to use when looking at the relationship Meursault shares with his mother. The beginning of the novel opens with the news that his mother passed away and establishes the frame of how the reader views their relationship.

Near the end of the novel, Meursault's relationship with his mother is discussed during his trial by the prosecution. Bloom notes that "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?" (Bloom) This is an important distinction because Meursault's relationship with his mother becomes more important than the fact that he killed a nameless Arab for no apparent reason. This is how we see his character and it goes all the way back to the opening line of the novel. His reaction to her death gives some indication of Meursault's personal character.

After Meursault receives the death sentence and has a breakdown in his prison cell, Camus writes “pour la première fois depuis bien longtemps, j’ai pensé à maman.” (Camus 178) Here is another comparison between the Gilbert and Ward translations:

“Almost for the first time in many months, I thought of my mother.”
(Gilbert 75)

“For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman.” (Ward 122)

These passages have the same effect as the opening paragraph. In the Gilbert translation, there is an emotional detachment and vacancy not present in the original. Ward’s translation manages to capture a simple fact; Meursault is thinking about his mom, but refers to her in a way that suggests less emotional distance. By thinking of his mom, Meursault allows for the reader to come full circle and conclude how to read his character, based on what each translation provides.

Gilbert Translation: Past Its Prime?

In his article *The Restoration of Albert Camus’ ‘L’Étranger’ in English Translation*, Eric du Plessis opens by noting that “the translation drew praise from critics, and it is a measure of its popular success that it remained unchallenged” (du Plessis 206) for over three decades. As the only English translation at the time, there was no other option except for Gilbert’s version. With further research, “a closer examination reveals that the translator had taken numerous liberties with the

French original... the narrative technique used by Camus in *L'Étranger* was deliberately patterned after an American expository style." Du Plessis 206) This critique of Gilbert's translation notes the stylistic differences, including Gilbert's tendency to use "illustrative sentences" (du Plessis 206) that starkly contrast against Camus "uncluttered simplicity." (du Plessis 207) By referring to the opening paragraph chart on page four, we see that Gilbert's translation is longer than both Camus and Ward's. He adds extra words when not necessary, such as the 'Almost' from the quote "Almost for the first time in many months" (Gilbert 75). The result is a clunky sentence that does not read smoothly, especially in comparison to Ward's translation of the same sentence.

Again, the importance of time also plays a role. One review by Wilson that Venuti quotes regarding the Gilbert translation of *L'Étranger* says that "Stuart Gilbert's translation seems an absolutely splendid job. It is not easy, in translating French, to render qualities of sharpness or vividness, but the prose of Mr. Gilbert is always natural, brilliant, and crisp." (Venuti 2) This review was published in 1946; the same year that Gilbert's translation was published. Other reviews from around the same time period praise his work as well.

Not all is positive; in his paper *Lost in Translation? A Note on Sexuality in L'Étranger*, Arthur Scherr acknowledges that Gilbert's translation "aroused little controversy among literary scholars. Nowadays, especially following publication of Matthew Ward's 'superior' translation of the *roman* in 1988, applause for Gilbert's rendering is the exception rather than the rule." (Scherr 263)

One of the more popular articles is Helen Sebba's *Stuart Gilbert's Mersault: A Strange "Stranger"* which argues that "The Stranger who emerges from the English version of Camus' novel shows certain psychological inconsistencies, not present

in the original, which stem directly from the translation.” (Sebba 334) She uses Gilbert’s translation as a case study for how translations can change meaning and ideas from the original text. Specifically, Meursault’s character and behavior is altered. (Sebba 334) One example she uses is during the trial. Camus’ text focuses on Meursault’s indifference while Gilbert inserts stronger feeling into his translation. Sebba writes “the mention of his mother arouses some equally strong emotion, presumably shame or guilt. [in Gilbert’s translation] Yet the very opposite is the case: all he feels is *ennui*,” (Sebba 338) or boredom. By inserting this emotion into the translation not present in the original, Gilbert affects the reader’s perception of Meursault as a character. The end result is a jarring experience for those who have the ability to read both Camus and Gilbert’s versions, as both provide two different character traits of the same person.

Gilbert’s ideology behind translation is best summarized by du Plessis, who says:

“From the beginning, [Gilbert] made a personal editorial choice to paraphrase and to adorn, rather than to translate *L’Étranger* straightforwardly. The result was a well-crafted text, easy to read and skillfully articulated; it was also a translation quite removed from the original French, both in terms of stylistic compatibility and accuracy.” (du Plessis 208)

This goes back to the idea of recreation rather than translation; if we view the Gilbert translation with less emphasis on rendering Camus perfectly into English, then it still holds value. The acknowledgement of the translator and their choices at least provides some visibility towards the process.

Ward Translation: Closer to Camus?

Overall, reviews for the Ward translation of *L'Étranger* are favourable and deem it as the best English translation. One advantage for Ward is that the passage of time is on his side. Du Plessis even calls it “the most accurate English rendition... it is an impressive example of the art of literary translation at its best.” (du Plessis 212) By simplifying the translation, Ward is able to closely mirror the French version and learn from previous translations of the novel. His background as a poet rather than a translator also plays a role in the stylistic differences and flow; Ward has greater insight into this task in contrast to Gilbert, who lacks the artistic background.

Ward's ideology of translation, as indicated by his translator's note, is that “it is by pursuing what is unconventional in Camus' writing that one approaches a degree of its still startling originality.” (Ward vi) He later adds that “an impossible fidelity has been my purpose.” (Ward vii) As a poet, Ward's translation has a quality of style that is closer to Camus' original work in French. The sentences are short and distinct; it “is a systematic translation” (Kaplansky 8) that does an effective job of maintaining the illusion of transparency. Ward knows his contemporary American audience and not only caters to the audience's expectations, but does so in a way that is less affected by language choice. He says “I have also attempted to venture farther into the letter of Camus' novel, to capture what he said and how he said it, not what he meant.” (Ward vi)

After comparing the English translations of Camus' novel, Kaplansky concludes that “Ward manages to craft a text that is... finally more accessible than the Gilbert, or even the updated Laredo version could hope to be. The poetic language translated by a poet isn't 'lost', but rather recreated to make for a living

text as opposed to a relic. Ward's translation maintains the vitality of a work... that certainly is in keeping with *L'Étranger*" (Kaplansky 29). The idea of recreation is

Conclusion

By analyzing the similarities and differences between the Gilbert and Ward translations of *L'Étranger*, we see that the translator's choice, even over one simple word, can have a profound effect on the rest of the text. Not only does it shape Meursault at the beginning of the novel, but also affects his development later on when he thinks of his mother again. These two examples are key moments because the relationship between Meursault and his mother allow the reader to better understand his character at the beginning and the end. Although the issue of the translator's invisibility exists, the focus has shifted to be more inclusive of the translator's choices and bringing them forward and through viewing the act of translation as an act of recreation. Each translation is a new text and its purpose is to try and come as close as possible to the original. Each translator takes a different approach, as Gilbert chooses the route of domestication while Ward follows the foreignization process. The end result is that Camus is better found in Ward's English translation as he keeps 'Maman' rather than attempting to change the word.

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