

Both sides now

Dina Leifer reports on a literary translation workshop where half the participants were native French speakers and half native English speakers



Dina Leifer translates from French and Italian to English, specialising in literary, marketing and editorial texts. Her first book translation, *Progress or Freedom*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019. Her translation 'Journey at Dusk', a short story for young people, was published in the anthology *Odyssey* by Alma in 2017. Dina began translating professionally after completing her MA in Translating Popular Culture at City, University of London, in 2015. She previously worked as a journalist, editor and content writer. She has a BA (Hons) in French and Italian from Manchester University.

I was delighted when I heard I had been accepted to join the 2020 ATLAS ViceVersa English-French workshop in Arles; but I was also nervous. I had wanted to take part in this annual bilingual event for years but this was the first year I had the required published book translation to my name. I knew it would be a rewarding experience. I just hoped my writing and translation skills were up to standard and that my spoken French would be adequate too.

The ViceVersa workshops are organised by the Association pour la promotion de la traduction littéraire (ATLAS), a body which promotes literary translation in and out of the French language. It hosts conferences, workshops and other literary events at the Collège International des Traducteurs Littéraires (CITL – International College of Literary Translators) in Arles, Provence, and also has a base in Paris.

ATLAS hosts ViceVersa workshops between French and several other languages at CITL all year round, including ones in German, Spanish, Hebrew, Italian and Russian. These bring together a small group of literary translators who work in the same language pair, half of whom translate into French and half in the opposite direction. The workshops are led by two experienced translators: one a native French speaker and the other a native speaker of the other language.

The participants can be at any stage in their literary translation career, as long as they have had at least one book-length translation published. They each submit in advance of the workshop an extract from an unpublished translation they

are working on, along with questions about translation issues in the text and information about the work and the author, which they will discuss with the rest of the group.

A varied but friendly group

There were five native French speakers and five native English speakers participating in the English-French ViceVersa workshop I joined. The participants – all women – covered a wide range of ages, personalities and careers, working on equally varied texts. The texts included young adult fiction, 20th-century American poetry,

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literary criticism and contemporary novels. The personalities ranged from loud and confident to quiet and introverted. Career profiles included well-established literary translators with many published novels to their names, academics, and emerging literary translators who mainly do commercial work (like me). We even had one participant who works three days a week as a physiotherapist and the other two translating poetry.

The workshop leaders, Nicolas Richard and Simon Pare, told me they had some misgivings about being two men leading an all-female group. But within a few hours of the

workshop starting, it became clear that neither gender nor any other differences between us would be a problem, because we all got on so well. The mix of personalities, ages and experiences complemented each other like different flavours in a fusion dish: younger participants were better informed about slang and contemporary culture; academics had more high literary knowledge; and so on. We all had our strengths, and every participant made a positive contribution.

A warm welcome to Arles

I was one of the last to arrive in Arles on the Sunday night before the workshop started. My journey had been delayed by Storm Dennis and was rather stressful. The wonderfully kind and efficient ATLAS training manager, Caroline Roussel, picked me up from the station in her own time, along with another participant, and brought us to the CITL, where she had also made a first-night dinner for everyone. After struggling up two flights of spiral stairs with my stupidly over-large suitcase, I walked into the translators' residence and was immediately greeted by friendly faces, kisses and hugs. Someone rushed to heat up soup for me; another person urged me to sit down. I was overwhelmed by kindness. It was a foretaste of the feeling of sharing and community that characterised the whole week.

The CITL translators' residence, where we stayed, consisted of a bright, spacious shared living area with a piano and a well-equipped kitchen, where we made our own breakfast and evening meals. People generally shared shopping and cooking, which also helped make the week special. We each had a comfortable room with our own shower room. Accommodation was free of charge, as was the tuition. ATLAS also provided us with delicious vegan lunches, delivered from a local firm in environmentally friendly tiffin tins. This was another thoughtful choice by Caroline and the ATLAS team: some participants had dietary restrictions, but we could all eat together at lunchtime. The weather gradually got warmer through the week, so that by the end of it we regularly ate lunch on the roof terrace overlooking the streets.

Most of the workshop took place in the airy ATLAS library, with its old stone walls, huge wooden roof beams and book stacks filled with international literature. The Arles winter sun gently warmed the room through the large windows, and in breaks between sessions, we could stroll around the flower beds and cloisters or walk around the balcony at first-floor level.

The city of Arles itself provided a beautiful backdrop, with its Roman theatre and arena and locations that we recognised from Van Gogh's paintings, such as the café in the Place du Forum. Wandering around the streets of the old city, we stumbled on historic buildings at every turn. I also found two great bookshops where I was able to stock up on young adult and children's books. One of the shops, Actes Sud, is in a lovely location near the riverside walk along the Rhône.

Getting down to work

The workshop kicked off on the Monday morning with introductions. It was officially a bilingual event, so I expected the English speakers to introduce themselves in English. But as we went around the horseshoe of desks, I realised that the other native English speakers all either currently lived in a French-speaking country or had done so for many years. They were completely comfortable speaking French in a professional context. I, on the other hand, had spent one year working in France (1987/88) during my BA. Aside from holidays, I had only come back to using French when I began my MA in Translating Popular Culture at City, University of London, in 2013. I can read and understand well, and I write to a reasonable standard, but I rarely speak French.

My nerves got worse as my turn approached. I could understand everything, but the French-speaking part of my brain seemed to seize up. When it came to my turn, I managed a short personal introduction in French then apologetically lapsed into English. No one seemed to mind, but I felt embarrassed. My impostor syndrome took over and I even wondered if coming to the workshop had been a mistake.

After the introductions, we went straight into analysing the texts,



starting with poems from *Westward*, by Amy Clampitt, a 20th-century American poet. These highly complex evocations of nature were difficult enough for me to understand as a native English speaker. Strangely, it almost felt easier to understand the French translation. Perhaps this was because I had less understanding of the nuances in French, or because a poetry translation may simplify poems to a certain extent? Either way, I was far from my comfort zone. But I was surprised to find I was able to contribute usefully to the discussion,

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despite my preconception that poetry, and in particular poetry translation, was something terribly difficult that I wouldn't understand.

As the workshop progressed, we realised just how valuable bilingual literary translation workshops are. Any mysteries in the text that even highly proficient non-native speakers did not understand were quickly cleared up by native speakers. The vice-versa perspective allowed the group to look at the texts from all sides, and gave an added depth and richness to the discussions.

It was also interesting to discover the different perspectives among

Hard at work with texts in the airy ATLAS library

native speakers of the same language. The three UK and three US native English speakers were sometimes surprised at the extent of the differences between our two types of English. And the French speakers included a translator from Quebec, one who lived in Switzerland, two Parisians, one living in Marseille and one who has lived in Oxford for more than 20 years. They had many interesting conversations through the week about regional expressions.

Beyond impostor syndrome

By the time it came to my turn to present my text, my nerves had subsided. It was a bilingual workshop, and I knew that if my French failed me, no one would judge me for speaking English! The sessions on my extract from *Tant que nous sommes vivants*, an award-winning young adult novel by Anne-Laure Bondoux, were immensely constructive. They boosted my confidence and convinced me that I did have a rightful place at the workshop. The tips and guidance from the two workshop leaders were invaluable. They conducted my sessions as they did the whole workshop: with a light touch, allowing the discussion to flourish, whilst guiding it gently and sharing their knowledge and experience.

After the challenges and nerves of the first couple of days, I enjoyed my time at ViceVersa enormously. I benefited in many ways: improving my spoken French; receiving valuable feedback and tips from fellow professionals; gaining confidence; and best of all, connecting with a whole new network of genuine, funny, kind translators whom I now consider friends.

The joy and freedom of my time in Arles seem almost like a dream now. But the thought that one day I will be able to visit the friends that I made there – and that they will be able to visit me in London – is something to look forward to in these difficult times. In the meantime, I particularly cherish the memory of the night we all sang 'Sunrise, Sunset' from *Fiddler on the Roof* around the piano. A recording exists, but I don't think the world is ready for it yet...

For more information, go to <https://www.atlas-citl.org/>.