

Logograms and Linguistics: An Analysis of the Figure of the Translator in *Arrival*

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Abstract

When it comes to the representation of the theme of translation in global cinema, Denis Villeneuve's 2016 Oscar-nominated film *Arrival* provides one of the most insightful and entertaining depictions of the figure of the translator. *Arrival* is more than just another alien film because its conflict is rooted in the concept of being 'lost in translation'. The film's tension diffuses only once a solution has been 'found' through proper translation of the aliens' written language. Here the figure of the translator, represented by the character of Louise Banks, is called to interact closely with aliens who represent the "Other". This raises the question, "To what degree does the translator become "Other" through the art of translation?". While Louise does not exactly fit into the category of "Other", she does experience forms of othering and becomes an "Outsider" through the process of translation. By analyzing Louise's approach to translation, method of thinking, view and relation to language, this paper aims to show how the film suggests that being an Other or an Outsider can actually be an asset when it comes to translating, which coincidentally emphasizes the film's call for openness rather than hostility toward otherness.

Keywords: *Arrival*, "Villeneuve, Denis", Other, Outsider, "Cronin, Michael", Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Logograms

Do you have the linguistic ability to translate French into English? Can you translate Mandarin or Cantonese into English? How about Heptapod B into English? The latter is the crucial question that causes the United States Army to call on the help of linguist and translator Louise Banks following the appearance

of twelve alien spaceships across Earth in Denis Villeneuve's 2016 film *Arrival*. Unfortunately, cinema has often portrayed the theme of translation as a quick, simple task that completely overlooks the arduous work of the translator. However, Villeneuve's film, based on the science fiction short story "Story of Your Life" by Ted Chiang, is one of the few films in global cinema that places the figure of the translator at the forefront of its plot. In fact, Villeneuve deliberately chooses to feature a translator to highlight themes of written language and communication because the conflict in *Arrival* is based on the humans' apprehension toward the aliens' written language and is rooted in the concept of being 'lost in translation'. The tension is only over once a solution has been 'found' through proper translation of the aliens' written language. *Arrival* is therefore a film that not only examines the written language of an Other, foreign species, but also demonstrates how the translator can experience forms of "othering" and "otherness". Louise not only spends an extended amount of time learning and translating the written language of the Other, but also spends a lot of time with the Others themselves as she regularly visits and interacts with two heptapods called Abbot and Costello. This raises certain questions like, "Does the translator also experience forms of othering and otherness?" and "Does the translator become an Other through the art of translating?". While I would not go so far as to say that the translator becomes an Other, I would argue that the translator in *Arrival* is or becomes an Outsider through the process of translating. The film goes on to demonstrate how being an Other or an Outsider can actually be an asset and highlights the need for openness rather than hostility toward otherness.

Arrival, like all alien movies, is wholly concerned with themes of foreignness and otherness. However, the film expands on these themes in an unexpected way by showing how the figure of the translator is also subject to forms of otherness, which can be defined as "the quality or fact of being other; difference, [especially] from an expected norm" ("Otherness"). While otherness can take many forms, an Other is usually considered to be an individual who is perceived as 'not belonging' or being different in some fundamental way from a larger group who represents the 'norm'. The Other is also often viewed as a lesser, inferior being who lacks some essential characteristics possessed by members of the group. As briefly mentioned, the storyline of *Arrival* centres around linguist Louise Banks, played

by American actress Amy Adams, who is recruited by U.S. Army officer Colonel Weber to act as a translator between the humans and the alien species, later referred to as “heptapods” (due to their seven-limbed anatomical design). Louise does not exactly fit into this “Other” category because she is still considered very much a part of human society as well as a member of the team of intellectuals who are attempting to learn more about the heptapods. Despite this, her unique task of translating between humans and aliens sets Louise apart from her company of mainly military personnel at the army encampment where she is based. This quality of being ‘set apart’ is what makes Louise an Outsider because although she is still part of the larger group of human society, her unusual relation to both humans and aliens places her “on the outside or fringe” and she becomes a sort of “misfit”, or “a person who is isolated from or not integrated into conventional society, either by choice or through some social or other constraint” (“Outsider”). This paper aims to demonstrate how Louise, and possibly all translators, is or becomes an Outsider through the process of translating by analyzing the Outsider translator’s approach to translation, their method of thinking and their relationship to language. This analysis will prove that becoming an Outsider translator is beneficial not only when translating, but also in fostering mutual comprehension despite vast differences and encouraging acceptance toward those who are considered Others.

When it comes to translation of any form it is important to examine the translator’s approach to the task at hand. *Arrival* suggests that the translator’s approach should be one where the translator does their best not to ‘belong’ to any cultural group so that they can be as impartial as possible during the translation process. This notion of ‘not belonging’ to the cultures they are translating from and into in order to produce objective, unbiased translations is what makes the translator an Outsider — they attempt to be ‘outside’ of both translation cultures. According to Colonel Weber, Louise’s top priority is to help determine answers to the questions “What do [the aliens] want and where are they from?”. Despite being an American/human herself, Louise tries her best to not allow her cultural background to influence her method of research and discoveries when it comes to translating the aliens’ written language. Louise ignores the pressures of Colonel Weber and impatient characters like Agent Halpern who, as military personnel,

assume that the heptapods' purpose on Earth is to begin some form of attack on humanity. Instead, realizing what is at stake should she translate Heptapod B out of context, Louise focuses on distancing herself from American/human cultural expectations to produce unbiased translations. The clearest example of this occurs during one of the film's most climactic scenes where the heptapods produce a symbol that translates to "weapon". Rather than jump to conclusions about what most American and human cultures would assume "weapon" to imply (a literal weapon of destruction), Louise points out that in some cultural contexts "weapon" can be understood to mean "tool". By pointing this out, she causes the Americans to delay pursuing a defensive attack against the heptapods. Had Louise allowed her cultural bias to influence her translation, she might have allowed the humans to accept the translation of "weapon" as a tool of destruction and potentially enabled the beginning of a worldwide war against the heptapods. This translation situation demonstrates how most people make hasty assumptions of language based on their cultural background, which the translator must avoid doing at all costs by becoming an Outsider and distancing themselves from cultural bias.

The Outsider translator's approach to translation also influences the position and role they play in fostering mutual comprehension between two parties — that is to say, the Outsider translator is able to adopt the role of mediator between cultures. In *Arrival*, Louise becomes the Outsider who both translates and mediates between the humans and the aliens. While Louise must put in much effort to attempt to distance herself from her American culture to avoid producing biased translations, distancing herself from the heptapod culture is definitely easier to do since she had no knowledge of their existence before their arrival on Earth. In fact, her distance from the alien culture is metaphorically depicted through the physical translucent wall that stands between Louise and the heptapods in their spacecraft. Louise therefore becomes an Outsider of both American/human culture and the heptapod/alien culture during the translation process, which makes her an asset because she is able to produce fair, balanced translations. Louise's character clearly demonstrates how the translator must be a figure 'outside' of two cultures in order to become an impartial vessel of communication and how, as a result, the Outsider translator can act as a bridge rather than an influencer between cultures. By becoming a third-party Outsider, the figure of the

translator can serve as a mediator who has the ability to break down cultural barriers.

Louise's role as an Outsider/translator/mediator between cultures is elaborated on in Klaus Kaindl's article "Representations of translators and interpreters" where he writes that the translator becomes "an ideal projection screen for questions about identity in literature and films [because of] their multilingualism and – related to this – their commuting between cultures" (Kaindl 145). Louise's character exemplifies how translators "become a metaphor for the foreign and the other" (Kaindl 145) because she represents a figure 'outside' of both cultures that she is translating between, a third party if you will. As a third party, Louise represents something foreign not only to the aliens, but to the humans because of her unique relation to the heptapods (she is the only human that the aliens are really able to establish communication with). Her status as a third party/foreigner/Outsider is shown through the fact that she is always separate from yet in the middle of both groups. In many of the film's shots, the layout of characters literally indicates these three parties: the heptapods on one side of the screen, the humans on the other, and Louise is always placed right between them in the centre of the frame, which clearly indicates how Louise experiences othering by both the humans and the heptapods. Kaindl further elaborates on how the translator experiences othering in his other article "Transfiction: Research into the realities of translation fiction". He writes that a "character who is a translator or interpreter as well as translation processes can be employed to examine the big questions and opposing poles of communication, such as understanding and misunderstanding, creation and negotiation of meaning, the self and the other, and encounters between languages and cultures, allowing them to be reinterpreted as fundamental issues of our existence" (Kaindl 10). As a translator Louise not only does all of the above, but demonstrates how the translator is a key figure in commuting between cultures who gives insight into the Other and questions of identity, another main theme of the film. Louise then develops into the ideal Outsider translator because she becomes a third party mediator who is able to foster interactions, understanding and negotiations between cultures.

Arrival is not the only science-fiction film to feature the translator as an Outsider who must communicate cross-culturally. In fact, it is important to examine various translator figures in film and how they navigate between cultures because it allows for a comparison and analysis of why some translators' approaches, methods and outcomes are more successful than others. Comparing multiple figures in film also demonstrates how *Arrival's* 'lessons' about translators are applicable in other cases and is a step toward considering how the film's portrayal of and suggestions for the translator figure may apply to real life translators. Michael Cronin does just this in his book *Translation goes to the Movies* where he examines the theme of translation in a variety of films including the Star Wars trilogies and discusses "how translation is called upon to deal with issues of radical otherness", specifically through the character of C-3PO (Cronin 108). C-3PO also embodies the role of translator/Outsider because he is a machine who operates predominantly with humans and has to frequently translate between intergalactic cultures. Like Louise, who has also previously done Farsi translations for Army Intelligence before the arrival of the heptapods, C-3PO often finds himself having to translate under tense political conditions. Cronin writes that C-3PO, like Louise and all cross-cultural translators, is "continually subject to political, military or moral tensions prevailing in the relationships between the different individuals and groups" (Cronin 111). Cronin goes on to describe C-3PO as "an in-between figure, a translator who must translate in a way between different realms" (Cronin 113), which could easily describe Louise as well. The difference between the two characters is that while Louise is able to resist cultural influences while translating, Cronin argues that "Translators in situations of conflict cannot, remain immune to the pressures of competing interests", and as a result C-3PO is often unable to translate objectively and succumbs to the pressures of his superiors, making him an ineffective translator (Cronin 111) and ultimately less skilled of a translator than Louise.

In addition to examining the Outsider translator's approach to translation between cultures, it is imperative to consider their method of thinking and view of language when it comes to analyzing these types of translation situations. As such, *Arrival* shows that a translator is an Outsider because they don't look at written language in the same way that most people do. Louise sums up her unique view of

language in the preface of her book where she writes that she believes that “Language is the foundation of civilization. It is the glue that holds a people together”. Whereas the majority of people tend to take language for granted and barely give it a second thought, the translator sees language and the written word not only as a complex system but as one of, if not the, most important social tool. For example, Colonel Weber questions and criticizes Louise’s decision to teach the heptapods specific names, pronouns and “grade-school words” like “eat” and “walk”, which she does by using a white-board and having her colleague Ian Donnelly act out the meaning of the words in very much the same way that one would teach a language to a child. Because Colonel Weber does not view written language in the same way that a translator would he, like the majority of others on the military basecamp, believes that there must be some alternative, quicker way to understanding the alien’s written language and then ours. It is only after Louise gives an extremely detailed, step-by-step explanation of her translation process and methodology in which she illustrates the importance of vocabulary and understanding of intent that he is left nearly speechless. Until this point, Colonel Weber, like most of the viewers, has not really understood the complexity of written language in the way that a translator does.

This idea that the translator is an Outsider because of their unique way of looking at language suggests that the translator is an Outsider because they are conditioned to ‘think outside the box’ when it comes to the written word, which in turn makes them more effective at translating. In *Arrival* Louise is tasked with translating symbols, called “logograms”, that the heptapods produce in their written language called “Heptapod B” (“Heptapod A” is the aliens’ spoken language and is of little relevance to the translator). This challenging task poses profound questions: How do you translate a language you don’t know? How do you translate a language that has not previously existed on Earth? Cronin once again comments on how this problem might be approached by explaining that when one does “not know the language [...] they must nonetheless attempt a ‘translation’ in order to make sense of a situation or place in which they find themselves. In these instances, [the translator] will try to correlate sounds, gestures, facial expressions with emotions that are familiar to him or her such as fear, joy, concern, menace or apathy” (Cronin 113). Louise, however, is unable to

base her translations on any of the suggestions that Cronin lists because the heptapods are a completely different species who give no visual cues and whose physical gestures may not have the same implications that they do in human cultures. In short, there is nothing familiar about the heptapods' visual appearance or spoken language, which adds to the challenge that the translator already faces.

It is at this point that Louise immediately turns to the heptapods' written language and demonstrates how the translator must 'think outside the box' by 'alienating' themselves from normal ways of thinking about and using written language in order to yield better results when translating. While most people who are not translators would attempt to relate an unknown written language to written languages that they are familiar with or similar to, the translator stands apart because they immediately recognize that this method would not work precisely because it is alien. For example, upon a first glance, the logograms (see figure 1) produced by the heptapods may have the initial appearance of the Japanese Ensō symbol (see figure 2), the cursive letter "O" or, taking more of a stretch, the peace or tao symbols. While some of these symbols may be slightly connected in some way, overall they would not help in translating or comprehending heptapod at all. The Japanese Ensō symbol, for example, is a hand-drawn circle consisting of one or two uninhabited brushstrokes to express a moment when the mind is free to let the body create. The symbol retains the logogram's circular shape, inky appearance, and is related to the body (the logogram is formed by a black, ink-like substance emitted from one of the heptapod's limbs). However, this is pretty much where the similarities end and, evidently, the Enso symbol does not provide any insight into what the logogram might translate to. Furthermore, there is an unknown quantity of logograms each with different meanings and only one version of the Ensō with one basic meaning. Obviously, the human filmmakers and linguists who created Heptapod B for the film were limited by their own imaginations. In fact, this limitation actually works in their favour and in keeping with their goal of creating an alien language because Cronin argues that if an alien language, in this case Heptapod B, were remotely recognizable it would not be 'alien'. He elaborates, explaining that the "definition of an alien language in effect is a language that most of the audience cannot translate. [...] [The alien language] must be capable of being translated, this

makes these languages similar to human languages, but it is precisely because we have to translate them that they are alien” (Cronin 131). As a translator, Louise knows that in order to translate heptapod she must forget what she knows about human language and develop a completely new translation process to translate a language that has never been translated before (which Chiang refers to as a “monolingual discovery process” in his short story), and as a result she is met with success.



Fig. 1 (left). A Heptapod B logogram. LEPSHOT. “Abbot is Death Process.” *Imgur*, 30 Apr. 2017. Web. 19 Mar. 2018.



Fig. 2 (right). The Enso symbol, Prast, Jules. “Enso – Japanese Zen Circle Calligraphy.” *Flickr*, 27 Apr. 2012. Web. 19 Mar 2018.

Undoubtedly, the Outsider translator’s approach to translation, method of thinking and unique view of language plays a great role in influencing their relationship to language. In fact, the translator is an Outsider because they have a relationship with language that sets them apart from the majority. Louise’s views on how to establish communication with the heptapods, such as teaching the heptapods English in the same way that she would teach it to a child, makes her unpopular with many of those around her, such as Agent Halpern and a group of rogue soldiers, who even go out of their way to thwart her ability to further communicate with the heptapods by planting a bomb in their ship. Yet, it is

because of the translator's unconventional views and relationship with the written word that they prove to be a very valuable asset in situations where translation is involved because they know how to use written language in a way that most do not. While undertaking her rigorous monolingual discovery process with the help of precise methodology, numerous steps and stages, visual aids, computer software, glossaries, etc., it is evident that Louise knows how to use language to her advantage to achieve successful end results as she is soon able to communicate quite easily with the heptapods.

This success seems to suggest the veracity of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which would imply that the translator can become a true Outsider because they potentially have the unique ability to “re-wire” their brains through language. In *Arrival*, it is Louise's colleague Ian who first mentions the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis when he tells Louise that “If you immerse yourself into a new language you can actually re-wire your brain”. Louise adds to this by explaining that “the language you speak determines how you think and see”. From early on in the film this Sapir-Whorf hypothesis becomes the main component of one of the major plot lines, specifically the development of Louise's ability to see into the future while simultaneously learning and understanding more and more of Heptapod B. Although the film buys heavily into the hypothesis and takes the theory beyond anything that is possible or likely, it does introduce interesting ideas concerning how language can change one's perception and worldview. In his review “Of Hopis and Heptapods: The Return of Sapir-Whorf”, John Engle examines the ways in which the Sapir-Whorf theory is used for *Arrival*'s purposes. According to Engle the theory concludes that “language shapes reality” because it “fundamentally shapes the categories and structures of how we perceive the world” and as a result “our world is coloured, or even determined, by the linguistic structure in which we think and speak” (Engle 96). Therefore, the translator becomes an Outsider because they allow language to affect how they conceive reality. As a translator, Louise experiences this to an extreme degree. When she starts to master the aliens' circular rather than linear language, she begins to understand time in a non-linear way as well.

While *Arrival*'s extreme portrayal of the Sapir-Whorf theory may invite much skepticism, I would argue that the translator can still become an Outsider by

allowing language to determine how they think, see and act. Engle, like the vast majority of linguists and critics of the theory and the film, is one such skeptic who argues that allowing language to, in Ian's words, "re-wire your brain" would be next to impossible (Engle 97). However, despite the skepticism of viewers and critics alike, I believe that the translator is still able to "re-wire" their brains through learning a new language, even if it doesn't include something phenomenal like seeing into the future. While the film definitely portrays the Sapir-Whorf theory as being true, even if the theory isn't realistic in the way that its creators intended it to be, the theory can be proven true to a much lesser degree. Even Engle, who provides a strong analysis of how the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would not be plausible, does not deny that "language cannot have still have a meaningful, even profound, impact on perception of everything", but that this impact has "obvious limitations" (Engle 97). For example, when Louise first converses with both Weber and Ian on the ride to Montana where the nearest heptapod ship has landed, it is evident that, using Engle's words, "language shapes [Louise's] reality". Whereas Ian and Weber are wholly concerned with finding out the where the ships are from and how they got here, Louise's proposed approach — "How about we just talk to them?" — demonstrates how she places language at the forefront of her 'reality'.

In this way, when further considering the Outsider translator's relation to language, Louise can be described as "living 'in translation'", a concept that Lisa Foran discusses in her book *Derrida, the Subject and the Other Surviving, Translating, and the Impossible*. Foran writes that this state of "living 'in translation'" can "produce a strange liberation by alienation" (Foran 1), which can be used to describe Louise's outlook on life and status as an Outsider. Foran goes on to explain that "speaking in a second language", or multiple languages, including those that have not yet been translated in Louise's case, "creates a sense of freedom and discovery whereby new ways of expressing the world are opened up which also opens up new worlds" (Foran 1), which is perhaps why Louise is so open and able to adopting the heptapod language. By living 'in translation', Louise is able to "[escape] the shackles of what is expected of oneself in one's home culture or 'mother tongue'" (Foran 1) and experience her life through

multiple languages, which shows how she allows language to dictate how she thinks, sees and acts.

Finally, the Outsider translator's relation to language is perhaps defined by their inclination to embrace language differences rather than consider them to be daunting or threatening. While the majority of people are intimidated when faced with the prospect of having to interact with someone else in a language that they are unfamiliar with, the translator sees this as a welcome opportunity. The characters of Agent Halpern and General Shang are particularly good examples of people who are intimidated and apprehensive about languages they do not know. This, coupled with the fact that they do not know much about the foreign species, causes them to make assumptions about the heptapods' language that are mostly negative. Their fear of the unknown hinders their ability to attempt to learn or understand the alien language, and instead causes them to resort to conflict rather than try to create some sort of truce. For example, when faced with the Heptapod B symbol for "weapon", Agent Halpern completely ignores Louise's suggestion that it may allude to a tool rather than an actual weapon, and resorts to negativity and violence. As a translator, Louise on the other hand, has a strong desire to meet the aliens in order to learn more about their language and the ways in which they communicate, indicating that fear does not have to correlate to hatred. There is no question that Louise's task of translating an alien language that has never been translated before is a difficult one, and there are many points when Louise could have given up. Although the number of differences between English and Heptapod B is many, Louise does not see these written language characteristics as daunting or impossibly complicated, despite how difficult they may be to comprehend. Instead she welcomes the challenge of translating Heptapod B and admires the traits that make their language so distinct from English. This appreciation of language differences not only sets the translator apart, but makes them a valuable asset in scenarios when languages differences may appear overwhelming.

Arrival is important not only because it is one of the few films that features a translator actually performing translations, but also because it highlights simple yet important truths about the figure of the translator. While the film focuses on the written language of an Other, alien species, it also examines how the translator

can experience forms of othering to become an Outsider. After examining the Outsider translator's approach to translation, method of thinking, view of language as well as their relation to language, it is evident that these characteristics make the translator an extremely valuable asset when it comes to translating. Although Louise is considered an Outsider through the process of translation, throughout the film she also plays the vital role in fostering mutual comprehension between the heptapods and humans. In this way, the film shows that otherness, whether it be in the form of a radical Other like the heptapods or an everyday, average human being Outsider like Louise, should be met with openness rather than hostility. While *Arrival* succeeds in creating a form of written language that is visually interesting to watch and in capturing and holding the audience's attention by making translation and linguistics stunning and dramatic, it also does much more than this. By using an alien theme *Arrival* attempts to teach viewers very human truths, including the fact that language is complex, powerful and still being explored and experimented with. In today's world of modern technology, *Arrival* shows that a human translator is still needed to foster accurate communication between living beings. As an Outsider translator, Louise shows that it is the translator's duty to be empathetic and to raise cultural awareness. By presenting the possibility of undiscovered species and cultures, the film also depicts how translation and linguistic studies are essential in broadening our current understanding of the world we live in, those we live with and especially those we don't live with. Hopefully *Arrival* can pave the way for the creation of more films concerned with language, the translator and the process of translation.

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