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## **A Linguistic Revolution: Incommunicability in Denis Villeneuve's "Arrival"**

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## A Linguistic Revolution

### Incommunicability in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*

#### Abstract

Communication is a reciprocal effort; not only is it a vehicle for conveying our thoughts, but more consequentially, it is also a vehicle by which we expose ourselves to the thoughts of our interlocutors. Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* tackles the issue of incommunicability in a novel manner: by addressing it in terms of an alien encounter. While *Arrival*'s narrative is centered around the establishment of harmonious communication between humans and an alien species, the premise behind the movie serves to address a deeper, underlying difficulty in communication present in human interactions with each other. If one were to take away the alien dimension, it would become evident that the premise behind *Arrival* is, in fact, a social commentary on an international inability to overcome geopolitical alienation. *Arrival* is eloquent in its complex investigation of human communication. Not only does it break down the logistics of establishing cross-cultural dialogue, it also probes into humanity's struggle to overcome its hostile attribution bias—a barrier to communication that is exaggerated through the use of extraterrestrials. The movie emphasizes the value of intercultural communication, accepting otherness, and assuming benign—as opposed to harmful—intent from the unknown. In so doing, *Arrival* effectively highlights the linguistic challenges that need to be overcome for humanity to form a single, global, and intergalactic community.

*Word count:* 2554

Communication is a reciprocal effort; not only is it a vehicle for conveying our thoughts, but more consequentially, it is also a vehicle by which we expose ourselves to the thoughts of our interlocutors. Through communication, we beget understanding, through understanding, we beget tolerance, and through tolerance, we beget peace. However, when barriers to communication arise, the relay of a message from a sender to a receiver becomes obstructed. Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* tackles the issue of incommunicability in a novel manner: by addressing it in terms of an alien encounter. The movie's main narrative focus is on humans attempting to establish communication with an alien race. One of the fundamental questions that *Arrival* explores is whether there is a universal human tendency to impulsively ascribe hostile intent to the behaviour of others. Conflict is humanity's default approach; we stigmatize the unknown, assume strangers are instinctively deceptive, and those who cannot immediately express their intentions to us are categorized as a threat. While *Arrival*'s narrative is centered around the establishment of harmonious communication between humans and an alien species, the premise behind the movie serves to address a deeper, underlying difficulty in communication that burdens humanity: a bias of hostile intent.

Fundamentally, *Arrival* demonstrates how the presence of a language barrier can give rise to, and reinforce, hostile attributions, as well as how this barrier can be overcome. The movie begins when a dozen extraterrestrial spacecrafts land in arbitrary locations across planet Earth, an event which predictably elicits world-wide panic. The ultimate setback that mankind encounters is the inability to interrogate the aliens—referred to as heptapods—on the purpose of their arrival. This is, in part, due to the linguistic barriers in their communication. The presence of a shared language builds rapport between individuals, and when two parties lack a mutual system of interaction, it becomes challenging to overcome attributions of hostile intent. In an effort to bridge

the language gap between the heptapods and humans, linguistics professor Dr. Louise Banks and her team are recruited by the US government to translate the foreign language. Indubitably, there are stark differences between human languages and that of the heptapods, which is wholly other. The heptapods communicate in a manner that has no known human equivalent. Oral interaction with them is an impossible feat, as Banks cannot parse the spoken alien language in the slightest, arguing that she is “never going to be able to speak their words” (Villeneuve 00:36:05). However, upon recognizing that communicating with the heptapods *vocally* is a fraught enterprise, Banks adopts a different strategy to transcend the language barrier: she employs a whiteboard as a means of *visual* communication, hoping that “[the heptapods] might have some sort of written language”. In recognizing that the heptapods use separate languages for their speech and writing, and that “there’s no correlation between what a heptapod says and what a heptapod writes” (Villeneuve 00:53:57), Banks and Donnelly enact their first crucial breakthrough in understanding the alien linguistic system: their written language is ‘semasiographic’, a non-phonetic based technique which “conveys meaning without reference to speech. There’s no correspondence between its components and any particular sounds” (Chiang 131). From this point on, the exchange of language between the heptapods and humans bridges the communication gap between the two parties. In fact, by gradually overcoming the language barrier, humans develop the capacity to probe into the cognition and world view of the heptapod species, allowing them to overcome any negative preconceptions about the species that they developed beforehand.

From a filmmaking perspective, *Arrival* successfully coaxes the audience into attributing hostile intent to the heptapods by building substantial cinematographic tension in the scene leading up to Louise’s first encounter with the aliens. The movie offers up expert-level sound design—or rather a lack-thereof—as the scientists first enter the alien spacecraft through a dark, cavernous

tunnel and viewers hear nothing but the sound of the scientists' heavy breathing into their hazmat suits (Villeneuve 00:28:30–00:30:50). Carefully placed scenes of silence and music are crucial elements for accentuating fear in a film and, in this scene, the suspense builds steadily through the implementation of low-pitched hums, deep-reverberant droning, rhythmic thumping and ear-resonating scores. The unease that viewers experience is coupled with feelings of abnormal fear towards the strange and foreign, a sensation formally known as xenophobia. Cinematographic techniques also have the ability to allow the audience to take part viscerally in the story. When incorporated properly, these techniques evoke the same emotions in viewers as those that are being experienced by the characters themselves. Take, for instance, the panoramic scene where Louise first witnesses the Heptapod spacecraft in all its glory (Villeneuve 00:18:18–00:19:00): emerald-coloured hills act as a backdrop, fog descends from the mountain-tops, and the eerie calmness of the ship is in contrast to the hectic activity at the military base. The scene creates ominous, melancholy images from otherwise mundane settings: a simple landscape becomes a harrowing environment. The stylistic use of muted, washed-out colours contributes to the quiet essence of the film. The grays, blues and milky blacks that comprise the majority of scenes give the film a melancholy and depressed feel, reinforcing the sense of dread and chaos experienced by the humans. Francesco Sticchi, a Film Studies professor, further supports this claim as he notes that “[the] first meeting with the aliens is primed by mixed sensations: the cutting rate, the soundtrack, and the cinematography, together with the foggy landscape, suggest mystery and uncertainty [...] These prompts lead to negative expectations toward the interaction with the heptapods.” (Sticchi 54). Ultimately, through the implementation of cinematic techniques, *Arrival* breeds powerful emotions of animosity and resentment towards the heptapods, reinforcing the theme of hostile intent.

Predictably enough, the inherent bias of anticipating harmful intent in the face of alien contact elicits a sense of urgency in humanity. Media channels, news outlets, and official government statements alike induce widespread panic. Scenes of chaos, anarchy and rioting ensue; “panic buying of gas, food and water continues to escalate” (Villeneuve 20:29), the stock market plummets, and the “president declares a dusk-to-dawn curfew” (Villeneuve 34:37). The world descends into a state of paranoia and foresees an impending doomsday in their midst. This urgency develops into uncontrollable anxiety and prevents effective communication with the heptapods. For instance, the prospect of the aliens arriving with peaceful intent is beyond the public’s realm of possibility, instead, the heptapods are thought to want to colonize the Earth. These ignorant assumptions of violence and war prompt hasty decision-making; government officials expect immediate progress, which inadvertently places Louise under immense pressure to acquire information posthaste. For instance, Colonel Weber is impatient with Louise’s desire to teach the heptapods human language, asking: “Is this really the right approach? Trying to teach them how to speak and read? [...] Everything you do in there I have to explain to a room full of men whose first and last question is, ‘how can this be used against us?’” (Villeneuve, 00:39:40). Louise justifies her approach by emphasizing that they “need to have enough vocabulary with [the heptapods]” to understand the answers that they receive from the aliens. Weber was short-sighted in his assumption that the art of decoding alien language would be a simple task, whereas Louise incessantly valued the virtue of patience in linguistic interpretation. While Weber first and foremost sought to communicate with the heptapods for the purpose of addressing them as potential enemies, Louise countered these fears and prejudices and intended to rather establish a relationship with them. Moreover, this inherent wariness of the ‘other’ is further exemplified by the US government’s swift mobilization in response to a potential extraterrestrial threat. They

deploy strong military interventions to the site of arrival; a military camp surrounds the spaceship, equipped with tanks, guns and heavy machinery. The drawback to this tactic is that, when people approach a conversation with weapons in hand, they reduce the opposing party's willingness to establish a trusting relationship. Furthermore, swayed by a conservative radio host's advice to "give [the heptapods] a show of force" (Villeneuve 00:58:47), these heightened tensions culminate in the bombing of the heptapod chamber at the hands of soldiers that had gone rogue out of fear. Though the heptapod's mission turned out to be a benevolent one of establishing an alliance with humans, humanity's hasty and aggressive response to their arrival risked compromising the possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship, in which case the movie's conclusion would have been much more somber.

Furthermore, *Arrival* demonstrates how an anticipation of hostility encourages humans to distance themselves from a supposed enemy by way of physical barriers, further hindering constructive communication. For instance, the humans take the pre-emptive action of "[receiving] an immunization dose that covers a battery of bacterial threat" (Villeneuve 00:20:48) prior to first contact, setting the precedent that the aliens must *surely* harbor a pathogen that threatens humanity. While this may be a logical precaution to take in order to physically minimize the risk of illness, it demonstrates the fundamental human tendency to assume the worst possible outcome. Furthermore, the scientists and military personnel suit up in heavy-duty hazardous material gear, complete with helmet seals and respirators, to prevent contamination. Donnelly questions, "what kind of radiation exposure are we walking into?" to which Lieutenant Marks replies "Nominal. These are just for safety." (Villeneuve 00:23:01). Despite acknowledging that there is no perceivable threat of radiation, the humans nevertheless maintain their defenses and adorn their protective gear to separate themselves from the physical environment of the heptapods' abode.

Moreover, aboard the spacecraft, a glass wall divides the heptapods from the humans so as to provide a physical barrier and a means for maintaining distance. Ultimately, Banks, who is aware of the impact physical contact has in creating meaningful interactions, makes compromises in order to establish productive communication. She dismantles the formal restraints that impede genuine connection by discarding her hazmat suit—despite the military crew’s frantic objections, approaching the screen, placing a tentative hand on the wall that separates them (Villeneuve 00:45:00–00:46:30), and eventually crossing over to their dimension. By stripping away the physical boundaries that alienate both parties, she initiates a literal and figurative shift towards proximity. She has lain herself bare and allowed the heptapods to see her as she is and, in turn, they reward her with their cooperation and trust. As Sticchi emphasizes in his analysis of the film, “the construction of an empathic interaction is necessary for the purpose of a productive communication” (Sticchi 56), however, such an interaction is obstructed by physical barriers born out of fear.

*Arrival* is extremely effective in addressing human biases of hostile intent, so much so that these biases appear in the lingual techniques that humans implement to communicate with the heptapods. When the heptapods first arrive, the governments of the twelve nations invaded by an alien spaceship implement different strategies to overcome linguistic differences, with some strategies systemically reinforcing hostile attributions. Notably, the Chinese translation team attempts to communicate with the heptapods through the use of Mahjong tiles, a tactic that is otherwise problematic. Mahjong tiles are designed to teach individuals how to converse in terms of a game; of triumph, defeat, and conflict. Banks expresses her concern for their use of this medium as a basis for interaction, noting that “every idea [would be] expressed through opposition, victory, defeat” (Villeneuve 01:04:59). Sticchi adds to this thought by stating, “for this reason, the



concepts generated through this type of interaction will imply a behaviour and an operational system that corresponds to notions [of conflict]” (Sticchi 58). Ultimately, this form of communication maintains the anticipation of hostile intent, as its very nature is based on aggression.

While the hostile attribution bias in *Arrival* is mainly directed at heptapods, it is also present in human interactions with each other. The concept of the ‘alien’ is not exclusively limited to interplanetary beings from outer space; it is likewise transferrable to interactions between humans of different ethnic backgrounds. Just as the humans and heptapods struggled to communicate, people of different cultures face equally mounting difficulties to understand each other as well. If one were to take away the alien dimension, it would become evident that the premise behind *Arrival* is, in fact, a social commentary on an international inability to overcome geopolitical alienation. The arrival of the heptapods drove the world to the brink of war due to presumptions that each nation was conspiring against the other or colluding with the aliens. Humanity’s tendency to ascribe harmful intent to the ambiguous behaviour of other people inevitably created a divide and set separate countries out on a viciously competitive course where it was everyone for themselves. Each nation was shown to be on the brink of chaos; for instance, “Russia [had] executed one of their own experts to keep their secret” (Villeneuve 01:23:52). On top of this, as each group learns to communicate with the heptapods, they become increasingly distrustful of each other. The handful of video monitors, displaying a representative from each of the twelve respective nations, cut off all lines of communication with the global community, as it is revealed that “nine of the landing sites have gone total comms blackout” (Villeneuve 01:24:36). Due to his own inherent hostile attribution bias, agent Halpern himself speculates that the aliens may be trying to implement a line of attack that the Hungarians call ‘szalámitaktika’ (Sticchi 61), the process of

dividing and conquering until only one faction remains; “we're a world with no single leader. It's impossible to deal with just one of us” (Villeneuve 01:18:15). It is evident that this bias of hostile intent is not only turning humans against the aliens, but it is also making them wary of each other. This wariness takes its toll when China becomes the first world power to threaten to engage with the aliens militaristically, delivering “an ultimatum [that] the aliens have 24 hours to leave Chinese territory or face destruction” (Villeneuve 01:19:15). Ultimately, it is Louise’s reminder to General Shang—China’s military leader—of his wife’s dying words that is responsible for a global unification of humanity. Her statement that “in war, there are no winners, only widows” (Villeneuve 01:42:40) presumably evokes empathy within him and consequently dissuades him from world war, acting as the catalyst for deescalating the military tensions. Upon realizing the damage that he would inflict if he initiated a global divide, Shang lowers his defences, orders the Chinese government to stand down, and consequently prompts world peace. While the majority of *Arrival* emphasizes the development and consequences of attributing hostile intent, General Shang serves as evidence that overcoming this barrier to communication is not impossible, especially when humans allow themselves to become empathetic.

*Arrival* is eloquent in its complex investigation of human communication. Not only does it break down the logistics of establishing cross-cultural dialogue, it also probes into humanity’s struggle to overcome its hostile attribution bias—a barrier to communication that is exaggerated through the use of extraterrestrials. The movie emphasizes the value of intercultural communication, accepting otherness, and assuming benign—as opposed to harmful—intent from the unknown. The film depicts a collaborative humanities project of different nations coming together ‘as one’. In so doing, *Arrival* effectively highlights the linguistic challenges that need to be overcome for humanity to form a single, global, and intergalactic community.

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