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Second-Place Winner

Academic Category

Emerging Writers Contest 2018

Language: The Amicable Monster in *Arrival* by Denis Villeneuve

In Denis Villeneuve's film, *Arrival*, Villeneuve establishes a Gordian monster in language that exposes a greater clash in cultures. By also romanticizing language's capability, the director reveals the duality that language holds: its prospects as a tool as well as another barrier to overcome. Villeneuve also cunningly adopts and adds the active and dangerous complexities of American isolationism and overall international relations. He then explains these relationships, and ultimately the manipulation of this monster-of-the-tongue by introducing the Sapir-Whorf Theory on Linguistic Relativity which mandates humanity's perception of the world through language itself. Despite the communication enabled by language, monstrosity exists in the division caused by personal and international monolingualism as well as in the mental predestination that results from our linguistics. These characterizations divide and more greatly segregate our cotemporary world.

Literary tradition identifies duality among the greatest aspects of a monster. In the *Arrival*, both international states and the characters use language not only as a tool to regenerate humanity's collaboration across borders but also as a weapon of division. Though commonly

seen as the foundation of communication, lack of understanding a separate entity's language leads to ignorance before communication. When Dr. Louise Banks first encounters Ian on the helicopter, Ian instantly corrects Dr. Banks' book, saying, "It's great. Even if it's wrong... The corner of civilization isn't language. It's science." (00:16:41). Here, the two specialize in and essentially speak two different tongues. This difference breaches communication and compromises dialogue immediately- both Dr. Banks and Ian are monolingualists in study and have mastery in only one 'language' represented by their professional fields. Rather than peace, this innocent ignorance initiates an unstable and unfriendly relationship, for "language is messy" indeed (01:07:10). The scenario applies at the global level in which the Chinese, Russians, and Americans find difficulty in collaborations despite their access to interpreters, for their separate cultures and ways in which they study the Heptapods differ greatly. Language rules culture and as a result, the culture of fear utilized by the governments results from the language of these eight states. The evil ineffectiveness of language shows how "language...is used to obscure and delude with regard to the use of violence by the State" (Crowley 24). Crowley explains that in the ambiguity of language used to report and update the world on this arrival, interpretation is left to the audience who often assumes with fear. Humanity is not to blame for this delusion directly, for we are using the only tool we have, language, to express ourselves. Only when we choose to assert more than one of these tools-of-tongue may we overcome this monstrous ineffectiveness and perceive reality beyond the constructs of the fear of one culture and language. As we learn multiple languages, we lose this monolingualism and gain the true benevolence that insight on diverse populations grants, for comprehending foreign languages leads all to realize the struggles of the foreign.

As fear and xenophobia set in due to a lack of polyglotism, Agent Hepburn and civilians assume the goal of the aliens to be destruction of mankind and thus disregard the lack of violence inflicted by the heptapods. This dangerously leads global security efforts towards competition and war; the eight nations begin to divide as they disagree on a correct interpretation (which stems from the language used to translate into) and linguistic nationalism becomes apparent. This doctrine underpins cultural nationalism and divides the nations further (Crowley 30). Ethnocentricity becomes the accomplice to the monster that is language, for the idea that one language is superior to another breeds this illogical concept. Only global citizenship and fluency in the languages of others, true communication, cure this superiority complex ironically caused by language itself. Crowley supports George Orwell's idea that language becomes ugly and inaccurate because of humans' foolish thoughts, however, the monstrosity lies within the lack of adapting despite knowing the weakness of a sole language. The world powers that experienced arrivals messily manage the information they decoded- China used mahjong and failed to recognize the infallibility of a losing party (01:04:24) and Russia murdered one of their own interpreters (01:23:27). Ironically, the nations, like Orwell with his own claim of man's foolishness, attack each other on their lack of information and critique the language rather than the concepts the words seek to portray (Crowley 24). Linguistic decline and the lack of responsibility in the use of a tool as hazardous as language demonstrates a greater cultural decay (Crowley 31). Not only does the romantic presence of language draw speakers towards it and to evil, it also naturally signals the failure of mankind and the abuse it imposes onto those who wish simply to communicate.

In the communications across borders, foreign relations depend heavily on precision of language; however, just as Orwell ascribes political chaos to the decay of language, the cultural differences between China, Russia, and the U.S. encourages a rivalry. However, “just as one of the major mandates of the Council on Foreign Relations in the 1940s was to “enlighten” the American public by mobilizing internationalist sentiment...neoconservative think tanks like the Project for a New American Century were formed in the late 1990s precisely to prevent conservatives from veering towards “neo-isolationism.” (Kertzer 226). Isolationism degrades globalization and the goal of working as a world rather than separate alliances. Because such ideological strides have since returned, the world’s policing force, the U.S., has removed itself in a remarkable amount of international dialogue. The result being many Americans ‘rallying around the flag’ and only acting outside of borders violently when provoked (Kertzer 227). This isolation creates a false image of strength and closes the opportunity in cross-linguistic dialogue and thus polyglotism in international affairs. The self-reveling in American language and culture shall be insufficient to fight the monster-of-the tongue and its many effects of ignorance. The support of isolationism draws only from compatriot speakers and not those from other tongues which leads to greater force and violence as the like-minded speak the only language they know to created a more “conflictual international environment” without listening to the views of the enemy and even allies. De-escalation, as seen in the film with Pakistan following China in not sharing information, becomes greatly difficult, as each state then interprets the ‘black-out’ with the construct of their own language and often attributing the move to malevolence. (00:0000). From there, fear leads others to do the same and thus breaks the fine twine that translators (representatives of cross-cultural exchange and collaboration) built at each landing site.

Because much discourse relies completely on one language, English, and in a time where the English-speaking superpower chooses isolationism as foreign policy, such dependence limits consular access. For this reason, the United Nations, as the leading diplomatic body, avoids a single official language. The United States often capitalizes on the frequency of English within relational bodies and therefor may remain involved on the global stage without intervening. This results from “its growing sense of threat” and “has responded...by seeking to shore up its security, largely by political means” (Brym 204). Ironically, in doing so, the United States is fighting monolingualism, only seeing things with our own eyes, with more monolingualism. Perhaps utilizing a monster against itself recruits peace, however, ignorance does not succeed over ignorance but rather knowledge, here in the form of merciful understanding of others through polyglotism, conquers the ignorance of only listening to oneself.

Much of the monstrosity in language results from its power in predetermining fixtures in the human mind. Like borders, language defines limits- the mind may explore only ideas for which our language has concepts. Called the Sapir-Whorf Theory on Linguistic Relativity, this idea states that the linguistic tendencies of a language affect its speakers’ cognition and worldview. In the *Arrival*, the Heptapod language affects the speakers’ view on time. Just as the logograms are written, he or she who is proficient in Heptapod perceives time cyclically. This severely restricts the free-will and potential of a community as seen in the Pirahã community of the Brazilian Amazon which lacks words for numbers. As a result, this people group has “virtually no notion of time” (Douglas). The lack of numbers is not just an obstacle they unknowingly face, it “is deeply ingrained in their culture, and...in their language [and] confine their talk to subjects that fall within their own immediate experience” (Douglas). “This here-and-

now approach is reflected in their vocabulary and grammar, which largely inhibits talk of abstract concepts and generalizations” and thus “are a people who live for the moment” and “are among the least materialistic people of the world, with very few possessions and little desire to attain more” (Douglas). The lack of the numerical concept even limits their ability to argue “abstract concepts which involve quantifications” (Douglas). Though Sapir argues for this relativity between language and perception, Whorf held the ideal that language determines concept (Carnes 266). The greater power he attributes to language embraces the monstrosity of language, for it grants ownership of the human mind to language alone. Whorf’s determinism conflicts with Sapir’s relativity; while Sapir grants language the role of surveyor, Whorf claims that language constructs our world, thus eliminating free-will. In describing this idea, Whorf appears to be over-aware as he even refuses to name this effect of the metaphysical in language in order to stay away from the variance that the name may portray: “Whorf appears to use "nature" as a name for a reality...which is diverse enough to be in some sort of experiential with all the world-views made possible by languages.” Whorf describes his ideas as one that “is...too drastic to be penned up in a catch phrase.” (Carnes 264).

Again, the single expertise of both Louise and Ian limit the two to establish an unstable relationship. These fields cause for the pair to struggle to find success as a team. As they learn of each other’s work, they become bilingual in the sense that they understand both their own and their partner’s studies. Likewise, some of the soldiers at the landing site choose to dwell in the conspiracies. Instead of choosing to hear from thoughts and fears unlike their own, they remain among those like themselves. This leads them to rashly implant a bomb on the vessel of the Heptapods. The conservative conspiracy theorist feeds them the only language they know and

finalizes the mental corruption of monolingualism, for “a hegemonic group can delimit words and their meanings, and thus...the ordering of language will engender political supremacy by way of the control of people’s minds.” (Crowley 32). Remaining in thought among those most homogenous to oneself eventually incarcerates the mind. The inescapability of this linguistic tunnel-vision manifests itself into opinions and general beliefs for “Whorf concludes that the thoughts of individuals in different language groups are themselves different in the sense that they constitute different conceptions of the world about us.” (Carnes 264).

As the film closes, the audience formally realizes the role and point in time in which Hannah arrives. Even Louise, a polyglot both literally and in her understanding of others, falls to the evils of the monster-of-the-tongue as she utilizes the vagueness of language with Hannah to protect her from her own demise. Like the linear orthography of the Heptapods’ language, Louise knows her life and that of Hannah from beginning to end and though she knows the tragedy, she continues to live it. Villeneuve’s film, *Arrival*, romanticizes the monster that is language and inspires viewers to become proactive polyglots, for they learn the demise of reactive monolingualism. Like the palindrome in Hannah’s name, the audience anticipates their own lives and each coming letter of this chapter in life and after having received, in part, the gift from the Heptapods, they may choose whether to fall to the ignorance and duality of monolingualism or revel in the wisdom of polyglotism- the only worthy enemy to language itself.

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