Arrival and "The Task of the Translator"

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Abstract

Denis Villeneuve's film *Arrival* (2016), based on Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," nominated for eight Academy Awards, has made a great impact on intellectual and academic culture. While the stature of the film has grown to mythical proportions over its uncanny use of past and future memories, intertwined with its nonlinear temporality, my approach to the film is different, taking up an issue surprisingly ignored by most reviewers: the issue of translation. I explore the film from the perspective of Walter Benjamin's 1923 essay, "The Task of the Translator." This is the first step to explain the radical nature of translation of the foreign language, which transforms the limits of understanding and meaning of our own language by the *alterity* of the "other" language, the foreignness that can only be grasped by the dynamics of a nonlinear translation, a method developed by Victor Longa in his 2004 essay, "A nonlinear approach to translation." Rather than focusing on the film's nonlinear temporality, I introduce a novel and unconventional framework of nonlinear translation to analyze the alien language's nonlinear and nonalphabetic properties, which are devoid of any temporal dimension.

Keywords: Film, Translation, Nonlinear, Foreignness, Language, Kinship

"[Language] is the first weapon drawn in a conflict." Louise Banks (*Arrival*)
"Nothing is more serious than a translation." Jacques Derrida.

Introduction and Methodology

Denis Villeneuve's science fiction film *Arrival* (2016), based on Ted Chiang's short story "Story of Your Life," and nominated for eight Academy Awards, has made an indelible impact on intellectual and academic culture. The film has inspired many important critical articles (Carruthers 2018; Fleming and Brown 2018; Mamula 2018; Zavota 2020) and has been widely discussed online, where the stature of the film has grown to mythical proportions over its uncanny use of past and future memories intertwined with its nonlinear temporality. While *Arrival* follows many conventions typical of science fiction, it also addresses questions surrounding the translation process, including ethical, moral, and political considerations that are not frequently emphasized in the various commentaries and essays on the film.

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My analysis of the film adopts a distinctive approach by addressing an aspect largely overlooked by most reviewers: the issue of translation. Accordingly, I examine the film through the lens of Walter Benjamin's 1923 essay, "The Task of the Translator" (*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*; 1969, 69-82). This perspective serves as the foundation for elucidating the radical nature of foreign language translation, which redefines the boundaries of understanding and meaning within one's own language through the *alterity* presented by another language. Such foreignness can only be comprehended via the dynamics of nonlinear translation—a methodology articulated by Victor M. Longa in his essay "A nonlinear approach to translation" (2004, 201-226). Rather than focusing on the theme of nonlinear temporality depicted in the film, I propose an innovative concept of nonlinear translation as a means to interpret the nonlinear and nonalphabetic characteristics of the alien language, which is notably devoid of temporality. This approach aims to clarify the implications of foreign language translation, focusing on how encountering another language can redefine meaning and understanding within one's own linguistic system. The concept of *alterity* is foregrounded, and this foreignness is explored through the theory of nonlinear translation.

This analysis focuses on the dynamics of nonlinear translation, an emerging field in the study of linguistics, rather than the narrative depiction of nonlinear time, suggesting this framework offers additional insight into the film's linguistic and representational strategies. Although the film is an investment in the notion of nonlinear time, the narrative itself moves in a somewhat linear order in reverse, reminiscent of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Jane Campion's *Two Friends* (1986), Fernando Meirelles's *City of God* (2002), Gasper Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), etc. For example, the beginning of the film depicts the death of Banks's daughter, Hannah, but the last shot of the film heads towards her conception: the father, Ian Donelly (Jeremy Renner), asking his wife, Louise Banks (Amy Adams), "you wanna make a baby?" Between these two significant points of begetting and loss, the film provides the surfacing of memory in a nonlinear order, that is, it reveals memories out of temporal sequence. The main events—such as the arrival and departure of the alien spacecraft—also proceed in chronological order. The emphasis on the film as an exploration of nonlinear time betrays its own narrative strategy, including the encounters with the heptapods (named because of their seven limbs) inside the spacecraft.

Given that the central premise of the film concerns a linguistics professor—Louise Banks—who is tasked with translating the alien language of the extraterrestrial visitors, this article employs Benjamin's theory of translation from "The Task of the Translator" as its analytical framework.

The Task of the Translator

The task of translating Benjamin's ideas on translation is one of the most formidable tasks for anyone who attempts to translate or understand them. The essay contains the seminal ideas of Benjamin, which he himself claims to be too difficult for him to explain. In a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, he writes, "But it concerns a topic that is so central for me, that I still don't know if I, in the current stage of my thinking, can develop it with sufficient

freedom, let alone that I am even able to succeed in explaining it." (Cited in Disler 2011, 182). Paul de Man said that in the academic profession "you are nobody unless you have said something about this text." He goes on to say that "Even the translators [Harry Zohn, Maurice de Gandillac, etc.], who certainly are close to the text, who had to read it closely to some extent, don't seem to have the slightest idea of what Benjamin is saying…" (2000, 18). Carol Jacobs, in "The Monstrosity of Translation," states that Benjamin's essay is an act of translation itself, "a translation of translation…an uncanny translation of sorts, its concern is not the readers' comprehension nor is its essence communication" (1975, 756). For Benjamin, the task of translation is to make the reader's familiar language appear foreign, rather than making foreign words comprehensible.

Benjamin's philosophy of translation does not prescribe a specific or fixed method for translating texts. Rather than offering a step-by-step procedure, Benjamin emphasizes an approach that is rooted in the sacredness and purity of language. He suggests that the process of translation should be governed by the principle of "pure language" (*reine Sprache*), treating language as a sacred doctrine rather than a simple vehicle for exchanging meanings. According to Benjamin, translators are entrusted with the duty to safeguard the purity of language. Their work should not simply transfer meanings from one language to another, but rather nurture and allow the essence of the original text to mature within the translated version. This process requires an attitude of deep reverence towards language itself, recognizing the importance of maintaining its kinship and connection to its divine origin.

For Benjamin, the real task of translation is to render the traditional concept of translation, in which the meaning of the foreign words and sentences is made comprehensible within the reader's linguistic milieu, incomprehensible in such a way that the familiar sight of the reader's own language turns radically different in its foreignness. This foreignness of their language is not appropriated by our language; on the contrary, what is ours, our own language, is made foreign. In a recently published article, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of Language and Translation," I have suggested that "for Benjamin, the true task of translation is to transform the traditional notion of translation—where the meaning of foreign words and sentences is made comprehensible within the reader's linguistic milieu—by rendering it incomprehensible in such a way that the familiar aspects of the reader's own language become radically different in its foreignness. This foreignness is not appropriated by our language; on the contrary, what is ours—our own language—is made foreign" (Sinha 2025, 98-99). As an example, Benjamin cites Rudolf Pannwitz as one of his models for translation: "Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works.... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (Benjamin 1969, 80-81).

In other words, translation involves making the familiar elements of one's own language appear unfamiliar when confronted with a foreign language, rather than simply assimilating foreign meaning into the reader's language. Such a perspective provides an initial explanation for the radical nature of Banks's translation of the alien language, which redefines the boundaries of understanding and meaning within her own language through the encounter with otherness. The notion of foreignness—and access to it through nonlinear translation—is addressed further in the analysis.

Benjamin argues that translation should not merely transfer meaning from one language to another but should transform our understanding of our own language by exposing us to the foreignness of another. This approach challenges traditional notions of translation as simple equivalence. The task of the translator, to put it differently, is to restore the foreign language, or, rather, the *alterity* of the foreign language; its irreducibility to be translated (*Übersetzt*) into any form of representation (*darstellung*), and, most importantly, according to Benjamin, to prevent it from "debasement," that is, falling from prelapsarian into the ordinary postlapsarian discourse of one's own language. Unlike information, which functions as a medium of communication and is subject to exchange and endless transactions of values and meanings in the marketplace of ideas, the distinctiveness of the foreign language is exhibited through its unique expressive quality, a form that cannot be reduced to any specific meaning or statement.

Benjamin contends that languages were not created for the purpose of facilitating human communication of meanings. Rather, the true essence of language lies in its capacity "to express" rather than to communicate (1969, 72). What language communicates, Benjamin asserts, is that "it communicates itself" (1978, 316). Benjamin posits that "translation is a form" (*Übersetzung ist eine Form*), indicating that the act of translating the content of a work of art or literature misses the fundamental point (1969, 70). As a form, translation embodies what might be referred to as "translatability"—a characteristic inherent in the work that exists for the sake of translation rather than communication. Consequently, a translated work does not merely convey information; by communicating itself to itself, it expresses a profound degree of meaning without explicitly communicating anything.

"Translation is a form" is central to Benjamin's argument in the essay. He does not explicitly define form beyond describing it as "translatability," which arises when a text achieves a certain "fame" (1969, 70). He distinguishes his approach from conventional models that view translation as a direct transfer of meaning from source to target text. Instead, Benjamin proposes a model of translation not based on meaning (*ohne sinn*). For him, authentic translation reproduces the work as an instance of otherness, rather than imitation. Understanding this perspective involves acknowledging the "correspondence" theory, a core aspect of Benjamin's view of language.[1]

According to Benjamin, language operates through correspondence between its linguistic and mental (*geistig*) elements. Communication occurs *in* language, not merely *through* it. This distinction is significant: for example, the concept of a tree is present in its mental entity within language, rather than being communicated solely through language. The essence of the tree exists in being (*da sein*), expressed in language, rather than being

transported as a fixed meaning. Thus, for Benjamin, language conveys the spiritual or mental entity itself, rather than simply assigning referential meaning. The linguistic sign "tree" expresses this capacity—it is not the thing itself, but the ability to express "tree" that constitutes communication. Therefore, the true meaning of language lies not in the word selected to describe something, but in conveying its spiritual dimension or essence.

Benjamin further argues that language cannot be reduced to quantitative functions, such as assigning numbers, but instead should aspire to express qualitative aspects of its pure function or dimensionality. While languages are numerous and varied, their underlying qualitative role remains unified in facilitating the communication of language's essence. He emphasizes that "the mental being communicates itself in, *not through*, a language" (emphasis added) (1978, 317). Communicability is therefore central to Benjamin's thesis regarding the translator's task. The translator Banks is tasked by the United States government to facilitate communication with the heptapods, aligning with Benjamin's emphasis on the responsibility inherent in translation. As a translator, Banks is invested with the profound responsibility bestowed by the United States government to facilitate communication with the heptapods. The connection between Benjamin's philosophy and Banks's task reveals a deeper dynamic within the act of translation. Here, the translator emerges not merely as a conduit for meaning, but as an active agent who participates in the transformation of both the source and target languages. This transformative potential is most apparent when the structures and concepts of the source language pose challenges to, and ultimately expand, the boundaries of the translator's own language. Through this process, the translator is prompted to reconsider the capabilities and limits of language itself. Thus, translation is not a passive act, but an encounter that can redefine what language can achieve.

Arrival does not meditate on the distinction and relationship between language and communication, but in Chiang's "Story of Your Life," Banks does reflect upon the performative mode of language as a "form of action." Chiang writes,

> But language wasn't only for communication: it was also a form of action. According to speech act theory, statements like "You're under arrest," "I christen this vessel," or "I promise" were all performative: a speaker could perform the action only by uttering the words…. For the heptapods all language was performative. Instead of using language to inform, they used language to actualize." (138)

One of the central issues of the film is whether it is possible to decipher, understand, and interpret a language whose origin and destination remain obscure to our mode of relating to a language structure. It is a film about how to translate an alien or foreign language that contains a message that cannot be translated by applying the traditional model of translation. Thus, the film is not so much about what is now fashionably coined as "decoding" the message, but understanding the *form* of the message before any translation method can be applied to decode the message. For instance, when Banks first deciphers the heptapods' circular script, the film visually represents how meaning is constructed outside linear time, embodying Benjamin's idea that translation can radically alter our perception of language. The task of translating for Banks involves not only interpreting the content of

the cryptic messages conveyed by the aliens after establishing friendly contact, but also comprehending the mode and medium through which these messages are delivered: "The Medium is the Message" (McLuhan, 1994).

Another issue is that the source text, the alien language, is not a linear language; thus, the rules of linear translation are not applicable. Even learning the language, deciphering the syntactic and semantic system, is of no help. The alien language is not a language that can be learned. It can only be comprehended by pure chance and contingency. Here probability rather than certainty applies. Banks understands the intent of their language by moving beyond the narrow discourse of translation, by laying aside the programmatic predictability of translation. She approaches their language by abandoning the source of translation embedded in the exchange of meaning from the source text (SL) to the target text (TT). She reaches a critical point, with her sole source of inspiration stemming from her dreams and the unconscious realm. Through intuition, she comprehends the context in which the aliens were communicating after the interdisciplinary methodology of science and linguistics fails. The heptapods are inquiring about something that can only be understood by suspending logical, rational, and predictable reasoning, which translation typically imposes on the translator. Although the film's narrative is frequently analyzed with respect to its nonlinear treatment of time, evaluating its depiction of language from the perspective of nonlinear translation provides additional perspectives on the construction of meaning and experience.

Nonlinear Translation

As previously noted, this essay aims to analyze *Arrival* through the lens of nonlinear translation as applied by linguist Louise Banks, who is tasked with interpreting an alien language distinguished by its difference or *différance*.[2] The concept of nonlinear translation, although an anomaly in translation theory, is brilliantly articulated by Longa in his essay "A Nonlinear Approach to Translation" (2004). Longa attributes his nonlinear approach in translation studies to influences from chaos theory and complexity science, advocating for a theory of knowledge that moves beyond deterministic frameworks. According to Longa, translators should move beyond the traditional approach, which expects the target text to closely follow the original and accurately convey its meaning (202). He suggests that the translated text should not merely mimic the original but should also consider elements of unpredictability drawn from various fields such as genetics, biology, meteorology, physics, chemistry, anthropology, and mathematics.

For Longa, determinism implies predictability, whereas his concept of nonlinear translation draws on contemporary scientific understandings of nature, which view nonlinear dynamics as inherently unpredictable. Longa identifies core features from nonlinear dynamics that inform translation: "initial conditions, emergence, phase transition, attractor or edge of chaos, among others" (203). The essay provides an overview of the fundamental aspects of nonlinear translation as previously described. Beginning with the "initial conditions" involving military engagement with the alien spacecraft, followed by the "emergent" friendship of Banks and Donnelly with the heptapods, through to the unpredictable escalation ("the edge of chaos") toward global thermonuclear conflict,

the film consistently aligns with the principles of unpredictability. This framework is particularly pertinent here, given that unpredictability is central both to Longa's model and to Chiang's narrative structure in *Arrival*. The film adaptation does not always capture the full range of uncertainty and emotional complexity present in Chiang's original story, which explores a nonlinear conception of time grounded in unpredictability.

The nonlinear approach to editing in film and television is well-established; numerous Hollywood productions, such as *Westworld* (1973), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *Inception* (2010), have utilized nonlinear narratives. On the other hand, the application of nonlinear methodology within translation studies represents a relatively recent development. Given that the universe, including both cosmic and natural phenomena, often manifests chaotic and nonlinear properties, there is value in considering these principles for current discussions in translation theory. If natural systems tend toward nonlinearity, reliance solely on deterministic theories rooted in Enlightenment rationalism may be limiting. Embracing a dynamic systems model for translation allows linguistic transfer and meaning to be shaped by the inherent complexity of the task, rather than rigid predetermined logic.

The fluctuations of the non-temporal world, where memories and future encounters intersect in explosive forms, encapsulate some of the unpredictable outcomes in Banks's translation of the alien script. Unpredictable variables play a significant role in Banks's process of translation, paralleling the dynamics of nonlinearity. Key examples include her daughter's unexpected question regarding the non-zero-sum, another unforeseen element stemming from her daughter's school project, and the looming threat of nuclear conflict. These fluctuations within a non-temporal world—where past memories and future events intersect—manifest as unpredictable outcomes in her interpretation of the alien symbols.

During the latter part of the film, the military establishment elects to deploy soldiers into the heptapods' vessel to initiate an assault. In response, the heptapods react defensively, forcefully ejecting the soldiers from their craft. They relocate the ship from the military base. Banks boards the alien ship alone. Inside, she encounters the heptapods in a smoke-filled area without a visible screen. She interacts with their written language and apologizes, stating, "I am sorry, we are sorry." The heptapods respond using their own language accompanied by English translations. Banks asks about knowledge of the future. It is revealed that her daughter, Hannah (Abigail Pniowsky as 8-year-old Hannah; Julia Scarlett Dan as 12-year-old Hannah, Jadyn Malone as 6-year-old Hannah), had previously referenced future events. Hannah needs to create a TV show and gives Banks a drawing depicting two adults and a child. The proposed title for the show is "Mommy and Daddy talk to animals." In a flashback, drawings and clay pottery depicting the heptapods appear on Hannah's desk, along with the words: "Louise sees future. Weapons open Time" written in English. The significance of these enigmatic words will be revealed or translated at the climactic moment of the film.

In nonlinear translation, the meaning of the original is not replicated in the translated text but is subjected to the inherent ambiguity and diversity of any language when it interacts with another language. Although, as Benjamin rightly claims that the original has nothing to do with its translation, the original owes nothing to its translated

counterpart, yet it finds a kinship, an embryonic relationship, with the other in the form of its "afterlife" (*fortleben*) for its continuous survival (*Überleben*) from its natural life. Benjamin states:

> Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much for its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. (1969, 71)

In approaching Benjamin's concept of "afterlife," it is important to clarify that this term should not be understood as a mere continuation, as *nachleben* (afterlife), of the original. Rather, "afterlife" signifies a transformation that interrupts any sense of linear progression. This transformation does not simply extend the existence of the original in a straightforward manner. Instead, it creates a new form of existence—another life—that is distinct from the original. The "afterlife" of a text, then, is not a seamless or unbroken line from past to present, but a break that allows for the emergence of a new state or being for the work within its translated context. This significance of the "afterlife" of translation will be addressed in greater depth, as it represents a central theme within the film. The continued existence of both the heptapods and humanity depends on the future development and application of translation methods.

The Initial Phase Transition: Hostility vs Hospitality

Banks: "What is the purpose of your visit?" (*Arrival*)

Benjamin's concept of "afterlife" in translation provides a valuable framework for interpreting the film's movement from individual mourning to a broader, global transformation. The "afterlife" suggests that translation gives rise to a new existence for the original, one that is not a simple continuation but a reimagining and reconstitution of its form and significance. Just as Benjamin's "afterlife" marks a break from linear continuity, Banks's comprehension of her daughter Hannah's life emerges not through direct chronology, but through non-linear, fragmented memories that are unlocked by her engagement with a foreign language.

As mentioned, the film begins with the end of Banks's daughter Hannah's life in a hospital and retraces through a series of nonlinear flashback memories of the story of her life. That Banks can find meaning in her story, that is, translating her daughter's life into a narrative, only after encountering a completely foreign language, is instructive, as reflected in her words:

> Banks: "I used to think this was the beginning of your story. It didn't work the way I thought it did. Bound by time, by its order. Now I am not sure I believe in beginnings and endings. Days that define your story beyond your lives. Like the day they arrived." (*Arrival*)

The film begins with the unexpected arrival of extraterrestrial ships from outer space. The oblong-shaped spacecraft are fifteen hundred feet tall and there are twelve of them scattered all over the globe, including one in Siberia, in Russia, and one in China. As a laterally dehisced egg, it hovers a few feet over the earth without making contact. The door of the spacecraft opens every eighteen hours for Earthlings to enter through the antechamber to meet with their visitors. Banks and Donnelly, a physicist, are hired by Colonel G. T. Weber (Forest Whitaker) to help translate the message of alien visitors recorded by the American Military. The rest of the film deals with the duo's encounter with the heptapods.

The abrupt transition from individual mourning to worldwide upheaval is vividly illustrated by the sudden appearance of the extraterrestrial spacecraft. In the beginning the image of the research team walking through the tunnel-like interior of the spaceship appears upside down. It could be assumed that the team is failing to understand the situation correctly, approaching the problem upside down. They stand facing a rectangular screen, which looks like a 70mm movie screen. The aliens approach the screen from the "other" side of the screen mirror through a billow of smoke. The first encounter is a mysterious, awe-inspiring, visual acquaintance. There are no words exchanged. A low-pitched moaning is heard that sounds like the trumpet of a humpback whale.

Firstly, extraterrestrial beings are met with hostility rather than hospitality. This reaction is due to the initial encounter between the intergalactic species, where an overwhelming sense of threat directed at the visitors hampers a peaceful reception. The substantial military response to the arrival of the spacecraft eliminates any chance of a cordial and friendly welcome. Instead of curiosity or anticipation of something extraordinary and possibly beneficial, as in Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), the human reaction is aggressive. The arrival of the UFOs has been interpreted as a threat even before any actual contact. Understanding the purpose of their visit is essential for human survival.

In the initial phases of interaction with the heptapods, Banks and Donnelly appear more as interrogators and less as interpreters or translators. Her first question: "What is the purpose of your visit?" Subsequently, Banks points out a crucial limitation in the process of communication with the heptapods. Even if the extraterrestrial visitors were to directly answer the fundamental question, "What is your purpose on Earth?", there is no guarantee that humanity would be able to grasp the meaning of their response. This challenge stems from a lack of sufficient understanding of the heptapods' language. Moving from response (of the other) to (our) responsibility, let us further investigate the ethical implications of investigating the visitors. In an absolute sense of hospitality, from a Derridean sense, a host is not supposed to know why the guest has arrived at their door. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida puts the foreigner question under the mark of translation. To seek the hospitality of a nation or state, the foreigner is required to speak/write in the language of a state that is foreign to her. Therefore, the first act of violence comes in the form of translation (more on this point later). Derrida questions this act of violence by saying that "must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language . . . before being . . . able to welcome [her] into our country?" (2000, 15).

Therefore, humanity's first ethical task is to welcome the guests, not question them. In a manner of speaking, the initial encounter with the aliens in the film is already threatened by a preexisting bias, an *a priori* assumption, which looks at the arriving guests with hostility and suspicion, instead of curiosity or hospitality. The mission is typically perceived as aiming to either destroy Earth or subjugate its population to a technologically advanced extraterrestrial species. The basis of the prejudice is deeply cultural and political, which is reflected in the film as a major cause of the international crisis. The panic is spreading around the world. In the end, Banks manages not only to read and translate the alien language, Heptapod B, by forming a close personal relationship with the heptapods, but she also manages to avert the crisis of a global thermonuclear warfare in the climactic moment of the film.

Heptapod B: A Semasiographic Language

Does Heptapod B, a "semasiographic" symbolic language, contain pre-Babelian signifiers? Semasiography is an extremely important branch of writing and language, which deals with the representation of meaning, distinct and separate from objectification.

> Donnelly: "The alien typography or cryptography is dynamic and not fixed as in human writing. They change form and shape. Like smoke or fluid. They are fluid-like substances. Fluidity as opposed to rigidity that defines human language. The shape swirls and acquires different levels of density and vibrancy in the circular pattern with tendrils sprouting in all directions. Or they look like threads woven loosely together with threads sticking out every which where." (*Arrival*)

Heptapod B, the alien language referenced in Chiang's story, is inscribed onto a transparent glass surface composed of fused silica sheets. Upon examination, the shapes of these foreign characters display a subtle resemblance to the structure of photonic-crystal fibers (PCF). The interaction between the language's ink-like substance and the glass, particularly the intensity or force applied during inscription, appears to affect the resulting linguistic form. Even minimal variations in the application's force can produce significant modifications in the visual and structural characteristics of the language symbols. Here we are in the proximity of Longa's analysis of nonlinear translation in which a minor shift in the "initial conditions" can lead to unpredictable "phase transitional" states in the corresponding field.

While avoiding an in-depth discussion of the high-power transmission dynamics in nonlinear fiber optics—a process that enables light pulse variations and consequential spectral broadening resulting in higher frequencies—it can be posited that Banks and Donnelly are not solely focused on the form or diagrammatic representation of words. They must also consider the intended purpose and the directional aspect of phase shifts, as well as the trajectory with which projectiles impact the plasmatic screen, including factors such as intensity and force. These elements can be analogized to cadence, intonation, and accent within speech acts. At this juncture in their engagement with the alien language, it remains uncertain whether the observed phenomena constitute writing or spoken utterance. In the original short story, the challenge of distinguishing between utterances (phonemes) and writing (graphemes) is central to Banks's initial research objective. She explains to Colonel

Weber, who questions her approach, "If the heptapods have a mechanical way of producing writing, then their writing ought to be very regular, very consistent. That would make it easier for us to identify graphemes instead of phonemes. It's like picking out the letters in a printed sentence instead of trying to hear them when the sentence is spoken aloud" (Chiang, 2016, 101).

In a dynamical model of translation, as preferred by Longa, time is not represented in a teleological mode; rather, it can be accessed from any point. This implies that the translation of a sentence is not strictly dependent on understanding its meaning within the linear structure of the sentence. Instead, the translation can be derived from any point in space where the sentence can be interpreted. In other words, it is not the meaning but the word that carries the task of the translator. A literal translation, which Benjamin advocates, aligns closely with this dynamic process, as it draws upon any spatial context. Banks, in Chiang's "Story of Your Life," reaches a similar conclusion when considering the heptapods' language:

> "As far as anyone could tell, there was no preferred *order* when reading the semagrams in a sentence, *you could start almost anywhere* in the nest, then follow the branching clauses until you'd read the whole thing." (122, emphasis added.)

Additionally, what is Banks's approach to translating the heptapods' texts? Does she focus on the signified—the meaning—or the signifier—the word itself? The latter preserves the "opacity" of the word, which resists assimilation into the linguistic and cultural values of the target language (Venuti, 29). However, Banks's translation method diverges significantly. Rather than adhering to a rigid translation protocol, she engages with the alien language using both intuition and sensitivity, or "like a mathematician," as Donnelly describes in the film. Banks is captivated not by a stable form projected onto the screen of the alien ship, but by the dynamic and powerful emissions of blotched inkiness, the spraying of its semagraphic designs "sprouting like frost on a windowpane" (Chiang, 127). These "mandalas" are fierce, akin to a cosmic force—unmeasured and mathematically uncalibrated gravity—sublime in their generative process (Ibid.). Projected onto the screen like liquid smoke, these signs never attain stability and disappear as quickly as they form, analogous to spoken words that vanish upon being pronounced.

The alien language in the film *Arrival* is portrayed as lacking temporality. The film uses the concept of an atemporal disorder—chaotic unpredictability initiated by the arrival of twelve alien spaceships worldwide—to challenge the natural order of time, which is measured by birth and death. This creates two temporalities: natural temporal order and translation time. Translational time is characterized by circularity and a lack of linearity. The name Hannah, as a palindrome, symbolizes the circular nature of time where the beginning and end are indistinguishable. Similarly, the alien ships are palindromic in shape, reflecting their language's lack of a defined beginning or end.

How come the heptapods speak in entirety without any hesitation or confusion? Instead of producing individual words and sentences, they speak in entirety, in already fully formulated discourse. Is it possible to refer to their language as nonlinear as opposed to our languages that are generated within the context of linear grammatology? Their words embody a text, not isolated lexis. They seem to have no patience or regard for either

the syntactic or semantic components of our linguistic system. What is the basis of their language if it is not constructed on the dual axes of "syntagmatic" and "paradigmatic" function? They do not speak or write or project incantation of names irreducible to translation.[3] Their language seems to lack the very notion of the beginning and the end, that is, temporality. It is finished already before it even begins.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The heptapods' language does not follow a linear sentence structure but instead expands in a circuitous, asemic form. Unlike ideographs or hieroglyphics, the asemic symbols are signifiers without any known signified. These symbols do not appear to be constrained by the traditional dichotomy of signifier and signified. This means they lack meaning in the conventional orthographic sense. Donnelly highlights this in the film when he states:

> "Like their ships or their bodies, their written language has no forward or backward direction. Linguists call this nonlinear orthography, which raises the question: Is this how they think?"

This relates to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which is directly mentioned at one point in the film.[4] While the reference is casual, its inclusion remains significant:

> Donnelly: "If you immerse yourself into foreign language, you can rewire your brain."
>
> Banks: Yeah, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It's a theory about the language you speak determines how you think."

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that an individual's cognitive understanding of the world is shaped by and limited to their linguistic environment.[5] It is a theory developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf that states that the structure of a language determines or greatly influences the modes of thought and behavior characteristic of the culture in which it is spoken. Language governs the worldview of the subject, embodying a form of linguistic determinism that influences the cognitive faculties of a speech community. Also known as the principle of "linguistic relativity," it asserts that the structure of a language impacts its speakers' worldview or cognition. Structural differences in languages correspond to cognitive differences. Knowledge or cognitive functions are dependent on or predicated upon linguistic capabilities. The issue with this theory is that it suggests language precedes consciousness. Additionally, it undermines the subjective response, a cornerstone of cognitive theory, by relegating it to a predetermined order of linguistic exercise. Consequently, it limits the scope of linguistic irrationalism, which would also be governed by principles inherent within the linguistic milieu. The applicability of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to the film is a topic—the relationship between language and cognition—that will resonate throughout along with the more pertinent task of examining the intricate relationship between language and translation.

The issue of translation in *Arrival* is not primarily concerned with the incommensurability between the original text and its translation into the target language. Rather, the challenge lies in translating the alien language within itself—an *intralingual*

translation, as opposed to inter-lingual translation, which involves translation between two distinct languages. The question arises: how can phonemes be translated into morphemes? In Chiang's story, Banks extensively grapples with this problem. The spoken and written forms of the alien language are asymmetrical and lack equivalency. Banks's task is to translate visual symbols into intelligible signs.

Benjamin's translator possesses the messianic ability to restore the lost unity of the pure language from its fallen state (the "post-Babelian" stage). Banks, on the other hand, does not operate under any spiritual influence of language concerning its future preservation. Her primary objective is to prevent global annihilation. She faces a complex situation, balancing between two distinct cultures and languages, while comprehending the idea of languages as distinct worlds, as posited by the Sapir-Whorf theory. The message of peace and help from the space alien heptapods can easily be misinterpreted as war *and* destruction. How can she convince a world that does not understand the language of peace and harmony? At the precipice of absolute catastrophe, at "the edge of chaos," as Longa would say, *Arrival* desperately engages with the Benjaminian concept of translation.

The Universal Language of Translation

Benjamin viewed translation as "a proof of the idea of the world as language" (Barnstone, 240). His theory of translation includes an aspect of the "Universal Language" derived from Kabbalistic and Gnostic traditions. The "universal language" (incidentally, Banks's book in the film is titled *The Universal Language*) makes translatability possible and characterizes the film's scope within the function of uniting or restoring disparate languages to their utopian origin. The intergalactic aliens reintroduce the wandering language of exile to Earth. Benjamin's argument is not that there are infinite languages, each uniquely sacred, but rather that the potential for translation exists among all languages. Translation serves as a generative principle allowing languages to propagate in "kinship" (1969, 72). It aligns the affiliations of each language toward the restoration or "revelation" of "pure language" (1978, 320; 1969, 75, 82). Translation acts as the binding agent that connects the fragments of pure language in kinship, aiming for ultimate restoration. Benjamin's theory of language asserts that all languages trace back through translation. Languages connect through words, sentences, or structures, intending to convey meaning about their references. They supplement each other through a higher level of kinship, relating to the pre-Babelian stage of pure language. While meanings are confined to specific languages, the intentions behind those meanings *(Art des Meinen*s) remain infinitely possible across all languages.

> Rather, all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. While all individual elements of foreign languages—words, sentences, structures—are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions. Without distinguishing the intended object from the mode of intention, no firm grasp of this basic law of a philosophy of language can be achieved. (1969, 72)

Translation allows languages to break free from the confines of tradition and nationality, advancing towards multilingual communities (Mamula 2018). For Benjamin, translation serves to both restore language to its original universal kinship and give it an "afterlife . . . which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process" (1969, 72). In *Arrival*, humanity's survival (*Überleben*) hinges on this act of translation (*Übersetzen*). Few films in cinematic history, apart from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1985), have underscored this point more effectively than *Arrival*. Benjamin's letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal is particularly relevant here, stating, "I think I am convinced that any translation work that is not undertaken for the highest and most urgent practical purposes... necessarily has something absurd about it" (cited in Berman, 38). Banks's translation efforts, as illustrated, exemplify the pursuit of "the highest and most urgent practical" goals of her life.

The Purposiveness of Translation

Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" differentiates the meaning of life in nature and art from a historical perspective. According to him, life in nature possesses minimal significance because it is not self-reflective. In contrast, a work of art endures by becoming part of history, which subsequently sustains its existence. In nature, life and death have equal status. In nature, life is not even concerned with how it is lived. It is up to the living. But, on the other hand, the survival of a work of art is determined by history, which dictates its fate. A closer examination of Benjamin's essay reveals his polemical and possibly messianic discourse on history as embodying the true essence of life beyond the natural world. For Benjamin, true existence manifests not in nature but in history (or "spirit," as Derrida identifies within the Hegelian framework; 1985, 78).

Translation, therefore, acts as a historical form that strives to immortalize literary works. Benjamin established a robust dialectical relationship between history and translation, grounded in the concept of life's survival (*Überleben*) transitioning into its afterlife (*fortleben*).[6] Translation aims for eternal life rather than merely conveying information. Thus, for Benjamin, the translator's task is driven by "a special high purposiveness" (1979, 72), elevating it above ordinary communication. Translation engages deeply with the reciprocal relationships between languages in their linguistic forms. Benjamin's reflection on the translator's role emphasizes the intrinsic connection of languages evolving through history: "Languages are not strangers to each other" (Ibid.). This "embryonic" relationship is the commonality of all languages to share the same structure, that is, the desire "to express" (71).

The purposiveness of Banks as a translator reaches an exalted program in her quest for reaching a greater knowledge of the alien language beyond analogies and symbolic interpretations. She needs to understand the very purpose of the language with which the aliens "express" their thoughts in a nonlinear fashion. There is a special task, a "special higher purposiveness" that Banks must respond to as a translator. She has already

abandoned "the actual purpose" for which she was hired by Colonel Weber, which was to simply translate the heptapods' language, their intent and purpose for landing on our planet. Are they here to start a war and colonize humans, or is there something else that is even more sinister and nefarious? Banks immediately realizes that her purpose as a translator is of a much higher level. This purpose aligns with Benjamin's concept of the translator's historical responsibility to mediate and reveal the innermost connections between languages in their mutual kinship. The linguistic mediums through which languages articulate themselves share a common core, affiliation, and mutual responsibility.

For Benjamin, the original language was fundamentally the language of creation, rather than a mere tool for designating meaning. He argued that language did not generate meaning; instead, it created a world, a world Benjamin believed was no longer being generated in the fallen state of languages that have exchanged creation for meaning. The aspiration to reassemble the fragmented elements of original languages from their representative function and from their exercise in producing meaning, into the elevated duty of serving the cosmic order of creation, was seen as paramount. In this view, language does not reproduce meaning but imparts it through usage to fulfill the purposes of communication and information dissemination. A genuine translation does not endeavor to encode the original's meaning within the translation; rather, it aims to replicate the intention (*intentio*) of the original. Thus, the goal of translation is not merely to transfer meaning from one source to another but to undertake a redemptive effort to harmonize existing differences.

Translation should strike a harmonious chord, akin to pieces contributing distinct notes to a grand composition. These notes are not simple reproductions of each other, which would erase their intrinsic differences (tonality) in uniform replication. Each note must retain its distinct sound to ensure the symphony's coherence and harmony. The post-Babelian cacophony prevents languages from emerging distinctly as a collection or repertoire of a grand composition. Banks extols the virtues of an alien language. Conversely, the military generals devalue and denigrate their language by implying it contains information, such as threats. Like Benjamin, Banks perceives translation as a "royal robe with ample folds."[7] Banks's residence, described by one critic as a "chic, glass-walled modernist palace," serves as a metaphor for the transparency expected from translation, enabling the original work to become visible (Martinelli, 2016).

A translator must consider a range of factors, including formalizations of equivalencies in both languages where lexical signifiers correspond at both denotative and connotative levels. Additionally, it is crucial to identify associations of elements within paradigmatic and syntagmatic aspects in linguistic contexts that effectively convey meaning to the target text (TT). This process encompasses all possible selections on the semantic scale as well as the hierarchical rules governing these elements' interactions. Thus, even if Banks comprehends the paradigmatic form of the source language (ST) based on rule equivalency, she must still devise a method to integrate the systemic rule, derived from the paradigmatic context, into a syntagmatic structure to generate textual meaning.

Therefore, translation based solely on equivalent words remains inadequate until Banks successfully translates the intentionality (*Arts des Meinens*) of the language through which those words are expressed. She reflects on this particular issue when she talks with Colonel Weber:

> First, they need to know what a question is. Okay, the nature of a request for information along with the response. Then we need to clarify the difference between a specific you and a collective you because we don't want to know why Joe Alien is here, we want to know why they landed up… Do they understand a why question at all? (*Arrival*)

In *Arrival*, the heptapods provide the humans a chance to read their own future through language. Since their language contains the seeds or embryo of nonlinearity, what Benjamin calls translatability, it opens itself to endless translation and renewal, and if the humans accept this "gift of language," then they can make use of it in the future by determining the end beforehand in a more creative and intuitive way (Zavota, 2020). Banks needs to adopt a creative and intuitive approach to her translation, rather than adhering strictly to empirical methods. She must avoid letting external circumstances force her into viewing the translation of an unfamiliar language as inherently hostile. According to Barnstone, betrayal in translation does not stem from a lack of specificity or synonymity; instead, it originates in the inherent nature of the original work (259).

Traduttore, Traditore

In this film, a mistranslation or misinterpretation of an alien sign has the potential to trigger a Third World War. It is a proposition in which every act has significant consequences. For the US military force, Banks, a *traduttore* (translator), becomes a *traditore* (traitor), fulfilling the Italian maxim of *traduttore, traditore*, that is, "translation is always a betrayal of the original," by illegally contacting the Chinese General Shang (Tzi Ma) on the phone. She tells General Shang something in Chinese that the film deliberately and, rather, indulgently refuses to translate. As the audience is made unaware of what just transpired in Banks's betrayal of her country to General Shang, its real message is delivered to us, the audience, in the end of the film, as the dying words of the General's wife, with an obvious nod to the cinema's greatest secret dying word from *Citizen Kane* (1941): "Rosebud."

> General Shang: "I will never forget you told me my wife's dying words." (*Arrival*)

Eighteen months ago, General Shang informed her that she had reached out to him. She conveyed: "All translation occurs in the future, and the true identity and meaning of language in the present is revealed in the future." Although the General's wife's dying words are disclosed to Banks at the reception party of her forthcoming book, *The Universal Language*, written after the aliens have already departed Earth, this once again establishes the film's nonlinear temporality, where distinctions between the past, present, and future are blurred. In such nonlinear temporality, there is neither before nor after. However, in linear temporality, translation always follows a period of latency intrinsic to its fundamental function, restoring the work to its former duration. The nonlinear translation,

as it were, to speak through the Benjaminian idiom of translation, aims at the "subjectivity of posterity" (1969, 73). Banks's task, thus, is not only to translate the alien language but also to echo General Shang's wife's last words to him from the past.

The metamorphosis of General Shang's war machinery into a symbol of peace transpires after he hears his wife's dying words from Banks. Dying words contain the essence of life; they breathe life even as they expire. General Shang realized that these words, which he thought only *he* knew, could be recited, recycled, reclaimed, and reverberated repeatedly. In the process of translating the alien language, Banks discovers her own story, the narrative of her life articulated in another's language. Ultimately, she fails to convey anything significant about the *modus operandi* of the alien speech; instead, she shares a seemingly trivial piece of personal information from General Shang's life, leading to a complete disarmament by the Chinese authority. It can be inferred that the essence of translation lies not in communicating the core meaning of the other text but in creating new possibilities and new stories that enrich our world. Translation does not bring new meaning but introduces a new language to the translating world. In other words, to translate is to forget the primacy of the target language and submit to the proper name, to the impossibility of translation itself.

Banks's translation work gradually evolves into a "heuristic" form that is inherently unpredictable.[8] The task of the translator consists of many levels of operations. It could be hermeneutical as well as mimetic. She confronts the issue intuitively but also experimentally, follows the heuristic logic of trial and error. From the moment she decides to approach the heptapods inside their tunnel-like vessel, she disregards the military protocol established by Colonel Weber, demonstrating a significant departure from expected procedures. Uncertainty, burgeoning on chaos, governs her actions as she embraces an improvisational method in her interactions with the heptapods. By discarding the established rules of engagement, Banks introduces a complex dynamic between herself and the alien beings, humorously referred to as Abbot and Costello by her partner in crime, Donnelly, the physicist.[9]

By not adhering strictly to translation rules and instead relying on intuitive methods, Banks challenges the conventional behavior of a translator who is typically constrained by rigid translation norms, where freedom and independence are often considered subversive or improper. The complexity of Banks's task is heightened by the aliens' opaque mode of communication and their non-linear language structure, which is neither expressed phonetically nor morphologically. Her antagonistic relationship with military and state authorities contrasts sharply with her amicable engagement with the alien language and its speakers, reflecting an indifference akin to that described by Benjamin towards the recipients of the translated work. A translator's duty is to faithfully translate the entrusted text or language, without concern for the reception by readers. Banks exemplifies this principle through her translation of a word that can mean both "weapon" and "gift," refusing to simplify the meaning for an audience predisposed to hostility and preconceived notions. If translation is viewed outside the constraints of linear time, then a word interpreted as a weapon could also be seen as a gift. In essence, Banks

not only performs a nonlinear translation of alien inscriptions, but achieves what Barbara Folkart, a translation scholar, refers to as "poetic translation," regarded as the pinnacle of translational excellence.

Monstrous Translation

Folkart is coincidentally also a Canadian like Villeneuve (both studied in Montreal), and her notion of "poetically competent translation" is visually realized or translated in the scene when Banks joins her hands with the alien's limb, and they write together in a dance or trance-like state. Here we can say that the task of the translator is not only *readerly* but also *writerly*.[10] The translator is not only a reader of the work but she writes the work together, once again, with the original, fusing with it in a nonlinear fashion and renewing its original impulse and energy, *Art des Meinens* (mode of intention, as Benjamin calls it), the chaos and complexity, from which it had sprung and been torn apart. "Monstrous" translation or translating monsters, this is the threshold, the dangling Damoclean sword, under which Banks finds herself. [11] The world is forcing her to translate the monster, whereas Banks is occupied with the monstrous task of translation that rather impedes and destroys the meaning of the monster (as alien crusaders) by virtue of her monstrous translation.

Banks faces the challenge of translating under significant pressure, tasked with interpreting the aliens' message. To communicate with the aliens/monsters, Banks must first rewrite their text in her own handwriting for legibility. It is crucial to distinguish between legibility and readability; therefore, her task of translation is inherently writerly rather than readerly, as mentioned before. Her objective is not merely to translate the language used by the aliens, but to think and write in a manner consistent with the heptapods' language. The revelation of the aliens' message does not adhere to any specific translation law, as no such law exists, but rather relies on the *intuitive* principles of nonlinear translation.

The heptapods teach her the poetics of language, its innermost essence in nonlinearity. The foreknowledge of the loss and death of her unborn daughter (shown at the film's outset) is the source of her fierce devotion to the alien visitors who have come from another time and place to give humans the gift of language, that she must acknowledge as the task of translation. As mentioned before, the word that Banks first translates as a tool, she later translates it as a weapon before recognizing it as a gift. Each interpretation assigns a new linear meaning, allowing for another possibility only in relation to the ultimate chaos: the destruction of the world. From the chaos and complexity of the vortex of meaning emerge the possibilities of nonlinear connections that are undetermined and unpredictable. The military officer Halpern's (Michael Sthulbarg) accidental abandonment of his phone during a crisis enables Banks to contact General Shang, illustrating the universe's inherent unpredictability.

The Violence of Translation

> Halpern: "Our visitors are prodding us to fight amongst us."
>
> Banks: "There is no evidence of that."
>
> Halpern: "Sure there is. Just grab the history book. They even have a name for it. British with India, the German with Rwanda. They have a name for it in Hungary."
>
> (*Arrival*)

The constitutive violence of translation does not diminish the complexity of the translator's role, particularly when tasked with preventing the catastrophic occurrence of a hypothetical Third World War. The arrival of twelve alien spacecraft over twelve distinct global locations has transformed the concept of a "War of the Worlds" from mere science fiction to a plausible reality. The responsibility for understanding and translating the aliens' intentions falls upon a female linguistics professor, whose expertise in ancient languages is deemed crucial. The narrative also subtly addresses the fragmentation of a once unified "paradisiacal language," as diverse nations with varied translation resources communicate in a state reminiscent of Babel.[12] Each act of translation compounds the difficulties, and the risk of accuracy limited to the English language poses its own set of issues. Banks speaks Mandarin, and her heteroglossia and polyglotism are an advantage over the monolingual and nationalistic discourse of other countries essentially involved in their own linguistic/nationalistic discourse.

The aliens' last message, "many become one," is interpreted differently by various groups. Russians perceive it as a signal for unifying into a single aggressive force to launch their weapons. During the final session, the heptapods write, "there is no time: Many become one." A broadcast message is heard on television: "We might all have been given weapons. If anyone is receiving this, please." The sound of machine gunfire is heard on the television screen. For Banks, "many become one" could also mean some assembly required. She suggests that "perhaps they are encouraging us to collaborate. They are offering us a trade of a non-zero-sum game, a no win-win situation, a compromise." The term "non-zero-sum game" is initially introduced in Hannah's question to Banks in a flashback. She asks Banks for a definitive word for a win-win situation. Banks's answer, describing the term as "mutually beneficial" or "compromise," does not satisfy Hannah. Hannah knows that her father, Donnelly, uses a specific term. Later, Donnelly links this idea to the heptapods, describing their offer as a "non-zero-sum game"—where everyone can benefit. Ultimately, when tasked with translating "many becomes one," Banks renders a nonlinear translation of the phrase, borrowing it from her daughter's future media project to Donnolly's no-win-win trade comment to her own unpredictable answer of collaboration and compromise. Through this revelation, the earlier uncertainty posed by Hannah finds resolution, not through direct explanation, but as a result of unforeseen circumstances. This sequence illustrates Longa's assertion regarding nonlinear translation: earlier ambiguities can be resolved in unexpected ways, demonstrating how meaning and understanding may unfold in surprising directions. The final aspect of the translation process depicted in the film is

conveyed through a visual metaphor: the alien ship disappears into smoke. This scene raises the question of whether this is intended as a metaphor for translation, suggesting that when meaning is established, the word ceases to exist.

The film also exposes the fundamental political nature of language and translation. To think of language without politics is to ignore its fundamental character. The aliens' words or message are being, what Venuti would call, "domesticated," and their "foreignizing" elements being neutralized (2008). The violence lies not so much in the message that Banks is desperately trying to translate, but in the receiving technology of the target language that is inherently "hostile" and violent in its translating machinery towards the foreign. The translator's task, therefore, involves risk management, that is, not to let the domesticating agenda completely overtake the "foreign" factor. In other words, the translator Banks's task is to counter the violence of the translating machinery with the violence of her own translation.

Is Banks strategically deceiving her adversaries, the global military-industrial complex, in pursuit of a divine resolution? Is she applying Benjaminian theory of translation as a method to restore the universal/divine language before the fall, before languages acquired the combative traits of nations or tongues? Through the power of translation, could she guide these powers on the brink of universal destruction towards acquiescence and disarmament? For Banks, the multiple possible meanings of the alien word ("weapon" or "tool") that she translated provide an opportunity for a poetic translation mediated by chance and chaos. The surrounding chaos not only drives her to work frenetically but also allows her to employ imagination, memory, and creative interpretation. The emergence of a translated word through this process transcends traditional reciprocal and isomorphic translation approaches. The translation of the word "weapon" to "gift" occurs serendipitously.

Banks: *Angelus Novus*

"In war there are no winners, only widows." (*Arrival*)

A translator's task is akin to the backward glance of Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* ("Angel of History"). Like Benjamin's Angel of History, who observes the accumulating wreckage of history behind him as he is propelled forward by the storm of the future, Banks is positioned to be thrust into the future while her past has yet to occur (1969, 257). She possesses foresight of her future through an understanding of nonlinear time, wherein the distinctions between past, present, and future become irrelevant. She looks back on the accumulation of meanings intended for the work to be translated—a history of interpretations (wreckage?) that lies behind her—as she engages in her futuristic endeavor, a task destined for all translators who will follow once the translation is completed. No translation precedes the original, and the translation occurs subsequently, yet this subsequent occurrence is already anticipated as the original comes into existence. Banks navigates both backward and forward in the boundless expanse of her memory that is yet to be formed.

Banks, by comprehending the nonlinear nature of the visitor's language, gains foresight into her own future, including her daughter's death and her marriage to Donnelly—information she did not possess prior to the translation task. The film's nonlinear chronology perfectly mirrors the nonlinear nature of her translation work. It is imperative for Banks to resolve the crisis that threatens global destruction if she fails to accurately translate the words. She will lose the potential future involving her daughter's life and death. Having acquired the vocabulary of the nonlinear language, she no longer perceives the world as structured in a linear order, aligning with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

A significant difference between Benjamin's translator and Banks lies in their respective roles. For Benjamin, the translator's task is not tied to any particular purpose or direction; instead, the true aim is to disclose the spirituality, mental entity (*geistig*), or materiality inherent in the divine word, which all translations endeavor to achieve. On the contrary, Banks is tasked with preventing the world's self-destruction. Her mission, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze and Guattari, "to go from Mars to Venus," is starkly a cliffhanger: the word or language has the power to either save or destroy the world (2003, 490). Unlike Benjamin's translator, who focuses on the concealed aspects of relationships among linguistic kindred spirits rather than the text's meaning, Banks's objective is critical for the survival of humanity.

The Gift of Translation

Banks feels that her task as a translator is not to transfer the information from one source to another, to reproduce the meaning of the alien word in English language, but rather to restore the word's intent to itself, to take it back to its own origin. The real task of the translator is redemptive for it is forever in the service of the "renewal," that is, the afterlife, of languages.

> In the individual unsupplemented languages, meaning is never found in relative independence, as in individual words and sentences, rather it is in a constant state of flux—until it is able to emerge as pure language from the harmony of all the various modes of intentions. Until then, it remains hidden in the languages. If, however, these languages continue to grow in this manner until the end of their time, it is translation which catches fire on the eternal life of the words and the perpetual renewal of languages. (Benjamin 1969, 74)

A translator acts as a mediator between languages, allowing them to intersect in a subtle manner, akin to the line that separates and unites the horizon with the earth. The translator's role is to expose their language to the influences of another, thereby enriching it with the resources of the foreign language. In essence, the translator facilitates the host language's reception of the form and content of the guest language as both a gift and a promise. The translation is more concerned with the afterlife of the original text than with the original itself. In this regard, Banks's own life exemplifies the afterlife closely connected to her work.

As Benjamin has demonstrated in his discussion on translation and its historical representation as the afterlife of the original text in the target language, Banks's role as a translator similarly represents an afterlife of planet Earth before its potential destruction by nuclear warfare, which humans are likely to lose while aliens hover over different parts of the world. This perspective, that translation serves as a historical foundation for the afterlife of language, is essential in understanding that the translator's task is imbued with the "eternal afterlife of the succeeding generations" (71). Banks's afterlife is intrinsically linked to her work as a translator, where the entirety of her life's purpose would attain significance.

Conclusion

The aliens' supreme gift to humans is the very art of translation that allows the translator to break through what Benjamin has called the "decayed barriers of his language" (80). By translating the nonlinear foreign language into her own language, Banks enriches and opens a potential of her language that she would not have known otherwise. Translation is a process of expanding the horizon of one's own language's potential infinitely. From a strictly pedagogical perspective, the translator's original task should be to arouse interest in the reader of the translated text for a taste of the original. She should translate the text in the manner that fully and truly resembles the original in its "*intentio*" in the translated language, thus supplementing the original with a life of its own. Translation, writes Benjamin, "gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as a reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*" (79).

Languages are related through words or sentences or their structures, where they intend to inscribe meaning to the objects of their references. They supplement each *other* by relating to a higher level of kinship, the pre-Babelian stage of pure language. The possibilities of meanings can be limited or unlimited within the language, but the intention to meaning remains infinitely possible in all languages. The purpose of translation should be to awaken in the target language in which it is being translated a longing to hear "the echo of the original" (76). Like an echo, the translation in its foreignness must return the original from a distance. This is what a translation should do: Make the reader of the translated work yearn to read the text in its original form. A translation is thus a return voyage to the prior text from which it ensues. In other words, it is not a one-way journey, but it always comes with a return ticket.

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City of God. 2002. Fernando Mierelles and Katia Lund. Miramax Films. Film.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind. 1977. Steven Spielberg. Columbia Pictures. Film

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. 2004. Michel Gondry. Focus Features. Film.

Inception. 2010. Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros. Film

Irréversible. 2002. Gasper Noé. Mars Distribution. Film

Memento. 2000. Christopher Nolan. Newmarket. Film.

Mulholland Drive. 2001. David Lynch. Universal Pictures. Film.

Solaris. 1972. Andrei Tarkovsky. Mosfilm. Film.

Two Friends. 1986. Jane Campion. [No Distributor]. DVD.

Westworld. 1973. Michael Crichton. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Film.

Notes

[1] Walter Benjamin's theory of correspondence, evolving from Charles Baudelaire's concept of *correspondences*, examines the emergence of "nonsensuous similarities" that manifest spontaneously, described metaphorically as appearing "like a flame" or "like a flash." These correspondences, both magical and semiotic in nature, become evident when a child mimics a windmill or in ancient forms of written expression (*Schriftbild*), which Benjamin relates to phenomena such as animal entrails, star constellations, dance, and occult practices (see "On the Mimetic Faculty," 1968, 333–336).

[2] *Différance* is an insistent archi-trace of Derrida's philosophical oeuvre—to differ and to defer—a quintessential deconstructive strategy of a double writing; a writing that writes itself while erasing its own trace, for example, "as a textual mechanism of the unconscious" (Culler, 163). Translation is a form of doubling (ghosting), a double writing, which opposes the hierarchy of the original by displacing or disseminating, in the sense of delaying or postponing in, what Derrida calls, the language of "to-be-translated" at "the edge of the language" (1985, 185). The concept of translation as *différance* is central to the discourse of "*Des Tour de Babel*," but hidden, invisible, behind the façade, shining through the arcades.

[3] For Benjamin, the most sacred task of translation is to reveal the divinity of the pure language that functions in its Biblical role in the creative potential of naming (1978, 318).

[4] The Sapir-Whorf theory is an addition in the film, while Fermat's principle of wavefront, a crucial feature of the story, lacks any mention in the film.

[5] For an interesting reading of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, see A.G. Holdier, "A Grammar in Two Dimensions: The Temporal Mechanics of *Arrival* and the Semantics/Pragmatics Divide" (2022).

[6] The German word *fortleben* translated here and elsewhere by Harry Zohn as "afterlife," has created some controversy. Some translators claim that it is inaccurate. See Caroline Disler (2012). The literal translation of afterlife in German is *Leben nach dem Tod*(*e*) (life after death). The word is also translated as "to live on." For practical purposes I will stay with afterlife.

[7] "While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like *a royal robe* with ample folds. For it signifies a more *exalted* language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien" (Benjamin, 1969, 75; emphasis added).

[8] Barbara Folkart maps out the two trajectories of translation as heuristic or teleological. The former is by nature unpredictable but also creative. Teleological translation, according to her, "*done d'advance*, predetermined" (46). See also Longa 2004, 202.

[9] In Chiang's story they are named Flapper and Raspberry, by Banks and not by Gary (whose name is changed to Ian in the film).

[10] A lesson first derived from Schleiermacher, for whom, "the genuine translator is a writer" (Venuti 2008, 84).

[11] See Benjamin on Hölderlin's "monstrous" literal translation of Sophocles in "The Task of the Translator" (1969, 78).

[12] Here I am invoking Benjamin's essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in which Benjamin discusses the consequences of the fall of "pure language" (*reine Sprache*), God's language (1978, 326). For the Babelian confusion of multiple tongues, see Derrida's "*Des Tours de Babel*."