

## 5 THE MOUNTAINTOP

### Translation changes you

#### The language of heptapods

Certain kinds of translation require climbing. When the military translators in Denis Villeneuve's 2016 movie *Arrival* rise weightlessly upwards, they are re-enacting the ascension of myth. Moving in a "floaty slow-motion leap" from a mechanical lift, they are on a mission to make contact with otherworldly beings (Heisserer 2016). Moses, climbing Mount Sinai to receive the tablets from God, was making a similar journey.

Seizing the heights to make contact with the divine is a feature of many religious stories. Gothic cathedrals reached as high as possible; the Romantics secularized the idea through their worship of the sublime. The tower, the mountaintop, the alien space vessel, these are sites of elevation and pivots to a higher realm of communication.

With its vertical tower-like spaceships and its linguistics-based plot, *Arrival* is a brilliant retelling of the biblical Tower of Babel story, with allusions to the story of Moses thrown in for good measure. Like Moses, the translator in *Arrival* accepts only reluctantly the mission she is given and, like Moses, will see her life profoundly affected by her work. Both must make several voyages upward before they grasp the nature of the message they will convey to the people. And both explode in anger at the treachery

wrought by the populace on the ground when their backs are turned.

In both of these episodes from Genesis, attempted contact with the divine involves stakes of the highest order – world harmony or global disorder. But *Arrival* approaches



*Figure 5.1 Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), painting by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). The summit offers special access to the languages of the beyond.

its theme with unusual attention to the mechanics that allows cross-species communication to occur. And it adds an unusual twist. The conversation that is established with aliens has important effects not only for continued life on the planet, but also for the personal existence of the translator. Cracking the alien code turns out to have life-changing consequences. The person who ascends to the space of translation is not the same as the one who comes down.

### The language of heptapods

Denis Villeneuve's film begins with a *War of the Worlds*-like invasion by twelve alien spaceships arriving at different destinations across the globe. When the lovely oblong spacecraft tip into a vertical position in order to get closer to humans, they look like suspended towers. A team of linguists is conscripted by the military and charged with interpreting the alien language. The translators enter the base of the alien ship and float up to a glass barrier. The heptapods, who resemble giant squid, move in and out of a fog behind a glass partition; this slightly opaque glass becomes a screen onto which they project their graceful calligraphic signs.

The jets of ink sprayed onto the glass are strikingly original and hauntingly beautiful. But the squirting of ink patterns bears a resemblance to another, more famous, cinematic moment. This is the classic scene in Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments* when lightning bolts chisel out the letters of the Ten Commandments. Like the words of the heptapods, these letters are a message from the beyond that must be deciphered and interpreted.

Somehow the linguist Louise Banks manages to read the squiggles. She extracts from them a series of concepts distilled into single words: human, instrument, gift. But

it is not only the vocabulary of the language that Banks learns – it is the grammar and the logic. These will be imprinted onto her consciousness.

### **The grammar of time**

What is imagined in this movie is a kind of contagion theory of language contact. Once you have been exposed to the structures of another language, once you have grasped their meaning and their import, your sense of reality will be permanently changed. This is what happens to the linguist Louise Banks, who deciphers heptapod grammar and its very particular relationship to time – in particular the ability to see one's life both forwards and backwards.

To learn the heptapod language is to participate in a grammar that reads time differently, to enter into a logic of reversibility. As if infected by this knowledge, Louise Banks begins to read her own life backwards. She sees the end of her daughter's life just as it begins and experiences each event as a confirmation of what she already knows. What she has translated, then, are not only words, but the abilities they permit, the obligations they impose. Banks sees her world in a new way.

The stunning impact of the film comes from the coupling of two narratives, one public and one private. On the one hand, there is the very noisy evocation of a world in crisis: military vehicles converging on the spaceships, the gathering of news media, the confusion of the authorities. On the other, there is a quiet narrative of mourning. Louise Banks is remembering, and grieving, the death of her daughter. The visual syntax of the film is perturbed by the overlap of two temporalities, one that advances from start to finish, the other that confuses past and future, that brings knowledge of death into the moment of birth.

The short story that inspired the movie, *Story of Your Life* by Tom Chiang (1998), makes this confusion visible in the very grammar of the story. The tenses are scrambled in Louise Bank's "recollection" of the past. Future and past are intermingled in the sentences which both predict and recall, see into the future and hear voices from the past. The film viewer takes some time to realize that what seems like a flashback is in fact a vision of the future.

### The gift of language

*Arrival's* take on language is explained by a few sentences casually dropped into the plot. One of the linguists refers to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the idea that grammars are "hard-wired" into the brain. The hypothesis originated in the American southwest in the 1930s, when linguists studying the language of the Hopi Indians became convinced that – because their language was so different in structure – the Hopi lived in a mental universe light years from that of their neighbours. The linguists concluded that one had no choice in the matter – the boundaries of your universe are set by the language you speak.

The hypothesis continues to exercise a certain attraction, though it has been invalidated – in particular by Roman Jakobson who showed that all individuals live with a variety of modes of expression (1960). While structures and expressions in specific languages call up emotional or cognitive perceptions that may exist in others, still individuals are not locked by their language into fixed mind-sets. There are always ways to translate, both within and across vocabularies. But *Arrival* puts a distinct spin on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by suggesting that learning a new language can change the hard-wiring of the brain. In other words, the structures of your language can be invaded by those of another. Or, to put this more positively, there



*Figure 5.2* The linguist Louise Banks was magically able to translate these symbols of the heptapod language. In turn, she would be transformed by the act of translation.

may be defects or absences in your language that cause it to welcome the logic of another. Translation, then, enters into an economy of reciprocity. By engaging with another language, will mine be confused, modified, enriched? But also: will I become a different person?

### **A translator heavy of tongue**

This question takes us back to Moses, whose most surprising attribute – considering that he was chosen by God to be a spokesperson for the people of Israel – was his difficulty with speech. He was God’s chosen interlocutor and yet he is “heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue” (Exodus 4:10). Moses was a reluctant spokesperson, chosen for reasons he could not fathom. Would Moses be transformed by this encounter with the divine?

For Marc Shell, Moses was, like himself, a classic stutterer. He had to rely on his brother Aaron to communicate

with the people – creating yet another relay in the passage of the Word of God to his people (2006, 166). His stutter was a symptom of his self-doubt, and perhaps also of the double allegiance he had forged in his childhood. Moses grew up as an Egyptian, and therefore spoke at least two languages. Whatever the reasons for his language defect, he was surely chosen, suggests Avivah Zornberg, precisely because of his self-doubt, “for these qualities become a metaphor for a people in exile”. His difficulties mirror the difficulties of reaching divine truths. The stammer, here, is part of the message; the hesitation, the halting delivery, the fundamental inhibition of expression convey the excess of revelation: the Revelation must not be travestied by easy utterance (2017, 36).

It is not despite his handicap but because of it that Zornberg calls Moses “translator of God’s message” (7), a mediator between the ineffable and the effable. Moses shows that the role of prophet (or poet, adds Zornberg) “holds at its heart the paradox of speaking the unspeakable” of conveying the indirect truths of the divine, the gaps and the silence they contain (34).

It is possible that Zornberg’s characterization of Moses as a translator is rooted in a commentary by the revered medieval rabbi known as Rashi. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 1:5 (in the King James Version: “On this side Jordan, in the land of Moab, began Moses to declare this law, saying”), Rashi adds that Moses declared (or explained or elucidated) *in the seventy different languages* (1973). This remark by Rashi has in turn given rise to a lively tradition of debate. Why should Moses have spoken in seventy languages to the children of Israel? Is Rashi referring to the diversity of individuals that make up the people and therefore to an obligation to explain for each individual? Is Rashi anticipating the moment when the Bible will be translated into the languages of nations,

each of those translations coming to represent a separate commentary? Or do the seventy languages refer to the traditional concept of the seventy “facets” of the Torah, each suggesting intended or possible meanings?

The idea that Rashi might be thinking of the future versions of the Bible in the languages of the world (versions which would have already been plentiful during Rashi’s own lifetime), and that these refractions come to constitute a huge and ongoing companion to the original, is a compelling idea. Translations in the Jewish tradition are in fact considered not substitutes for the original (as is the case for Christians), but rather aids to comprehension of the authoritative text which is written in Hebrew. Muslims have this same relationship to the primacy of the Qur’an in Arabic.

Moses is a translator both in relation to the divine (the mountaintop transmission of the Tablets of the law) and to the people (the explainer of laws). Was Moses transformed by his experiences? Not in relation to his stuttering, says Marc Shell. In the Qur’an, Moses asked to be cured and Allah cures him. “Some Christian interpreters likewise expect that God’s presence ought to cure Moses of his speech defect. (The Easy-To-Read Translation thus has Moses say, ‘And now, even after talking to you, I am *still* not a good speaker’ [Ex. 4:10]).” But, in the Hebrew Bible, Moses does not ask explicitly to be cured. And Shell adds: “The Knox Translation of 1955 even emphasizes that the appearance of God, while not the cause of the stutter that Moses has already apparently had for years, is a factor that ‘exacerbates’ it. Says Knox’s Moses at Exodus 4:10, ‘I am more faltering, more tongue-tied, *than ever*’” (2006, 153).

But Moses is transformed in a broader and more fundamental way. His story is that of the unlikely prophet, who becomes the leader of his people. Though he is prevented



from entering the Promised Land, Moses is the very archetype of the individual transfigured by a mission of mediation.

### How does translation change you?

The film *Arrival*, like biblical commentaries, responds to a question that has haunted centuries of thinking about translation. How does translation change you? Walter Benjamin (1968/1923) believed that the best versions are those that change our own language by imprinting their logic on ours. They make us read differently, challenging our sense of what is from here and what is from elsewhere. Benjamin's translators stand on unstable terrain, where the line between self and other is unsure. And so the translator risks being undone by the task.

Kate Briggs meditates on the various kinds of risks that arise when the translator accepts the "invitation" of writing to be translated. The work says: "Come here, sit down and attend for a while to this, to someone else's work, and let's see *what it does*" (2017, 192). Briggs's emphasis is on this *doing* and the *being done to*. One of the most compelling aspects of the power of translation is the way it can transform the translator's mode of thinking and writing. This power is evident throughout Briggs's splendid essay on translation. Her loving relationship with the work of Roland Barthes, whose lectures she translated, informs not only her thinking but the very texture and rhythm of her words.

*Arrival's* take on the effects of translation is somewhat more mechanistic. But the story of Louise Banks and her interaction with alien tongues can be included in the long history of reflection to which Walter Benjamin and Kate Briggs belong. That the film's director Denis Villeneuve would be sensitive to the effects of language interference is not pure chance. Villeneuve was born and educated in Quebec, an intensely language-conscious place. In his previous

movies, language and translation have been important. This is especially true of *Incendies* (2010), a French-language film in which Arabic played a large role – as a set of twins from Quebec travelled to Lebanon in search of a lost family. In this film, as in *Arrival*, a drama of communication across languages takes on mythical – and transformative – dimensions.

*Arrival* has an improbably happy ending. The language of the heptapods is deciphered, and global harmony is achieved. The catastrophe of Babel has been reversed. Where the destruction of the tower resulted in the fragmentation of language, the visit of the heptapods has brought about the reconciliation of mankind. “Many become one” is the final message of the heptapods, as translated by the Russians.

But this triumph has not occurred without effects on the translator. She has had to expose herself, physically and emotionally, in order to grow close to the heptapods. We see this in one of the very first scenes where she takes off her layers of protective gear, in the presence of the heptapods. She is making herself vulnerable, but also signalling her absence of fear. She will receive the gift of their language in return. While the gift is of great value to mankind, it is of doubtful benefit to Louise Banks herself. She is forever altered by the threshold which she has crossed.

As a futuristic fable evoking ancient questions, *Arrival* is a compelling film. But it is especially effective as it evokes the intimacy of the act of translation. To seek entry into other worlds is to risk seeing your own transformed.

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