Arrival uses the tremendous communication problem, connecting with another species, to illustrate the importance of language and, more than that, our ability to communicate with one another. Language connects us and defines our vision of the world, our philosophy, and our epistemology. Our ability to use language and other forms of communication makes us human and distinguishes us as living things. Language gives us culture, purpose, and sometimes, conflict. Emphasis on communication with aliens, between humans, and within the own consciousness of the main character sets Arrival apart from the typical first contact film.

Language in Arrival is more than just speech or written words. Language is art and identity. Villenueve’s heptapod aliens demonstrate this concept beautifully. Lousie, the film’s linguist protagonist, struggles at first to communicate with the aliens, who let out long groans in no recognizeable pattern. Her calls to them prove futile. Only when she uses a visual aid and writes out words is she able to connect with the other species. In response they let out a ring of ink that coagulates into an artful circle. Deciphering these visual pieces requires a tremendous effort. Communication, here, requires a multidimensional approach, using not just sound but writing and actions to demonstrate different ideas.

Villenueve, the film’s director, focuses on some of the problems of human communication. Louise struggles to convince her military counterparts of the importance of a learning process to develop a shared vocabulary with the other species. Otherwise, she argues, communication will be fruitless. Informed by vastly different backgrounds and priorities, Louise works toward understand while military leaders fear and grasp at motives for the alien visit.

More than that, Villenueve emphasizes the conflict between human cultures that communicate differently. Nations with alien visitors approach communicating in very different ways. Louise tries to crack the code of circles while the Chinese and Russians teach the aliens the game Mahjong. Louise points out this game, used as language, posits an adversarial relationship.

This linguistic difference has huge consequences, when, as the film reaches its climax, the aliens “offer weapon” to humanity. The response of the Chinese and Russians is to attack. Louise’s response is to investigate and understand, hypothesizing they may not know the difference between “weapon” and “tool” or “gift.” China and Russia move to attack the aliens, and send the world into panic.

This conflict, central to the film, illuminates the film’s message about language. That we cannot understand one another unless we build a common way to communicate. When we fail to do so, the consequences are dire. We retreat into instincts of fear and we rush to protect ourselves instead of understanding the perspective of others. We lash out instead of studying. The language we use matters, and must be chosen with careful intention.

Arrival illustrates this point outside of the alien interaction. The emotional tug of the film is chilling at times, and heartbreaking in its conclusion. Throughout, the viewer sees flashes of Louise with a daughter of hers, the father not around. As the film unravels, it dawns on the viewer that these flashes are in fact of Louise’s future, not her past. Louise becomes fluent in the circular language of the heptopods, and with it begins to see time in a different way. In a rather skimpy explanation, the film offers that understanding different languages “rewires the brain.” Time in the heptapod’s eyes, has no beginning and end, it runs in a circle. Perhaps the biggest language barrier in Arrival is how to overcome this most fundamental difference in perception.

Louise’s marriage pays the price for being unable to bridge this gap. Louise sees a life played out before her eyes -- a marriage and a baby with her partner Ian, a separation, and a rare illness that kills her daughter. In one flash forward, she tells her daughter of her failures to communicate with her partner, and blames Ian’s leaving on the unfortunate timing of the reveal that Louise knew all along. She knew their daughter would die, and consciously consented to the pain and suffering it would cause the couple.

This heartbreaking reveleation reveals some of the nuance in the film’s claims about the power of language. Despite temporal liberation, Louise remains unable to save a marriage that falls apart because of her own inability to communicate what she knows is going to happen. Despite incredible progress toward understanding a race completely unlike her own, she can’t fully overcome a misunderstanding with someone she loves, someone that shares her species, her language, and her passions. She asks Ian, “if you could do your life all over again, would you?”

In all, the “arrival” is an instrument for humans to look inward, to reveal a message that we must strive for understanding, even knowing that we will never fully bridge the gap. Fostering understanding through language is a gift to solve problems. It helps Louise prevent the Chinese from unleashing a potentially disasterous attack on the alien visitors. It gives Louise the incredible ability to see time differently and choose her path, to come to terms with her life and daughters passing. Theorietically it will help human and heptopods interact again in three thousand years when the heptopods will “need help” from humanity.

Language, Arrival argues, is more than just what we speak. One sees language in the whispy ink in the heptopod’s chamber, in the chilling score that accompanies the film, in the dramatic tapping of alien tentacles on the glass barrier, and in the tender embrace at the film’s end when Louise, wrapped in Ian’s arms, realizes her future and chooses to embrace it all.

Language, in Arrival, informed by different nationalities, career backgrounds, species, and perceptions of time, teaches us that the struggle to understand defines us as living things. The march toward understanding will never create complete comprehension. Even beings of the same species and same language struggle to bridge this gap. But it is a path that Louise walks admirably and her alien friends float and squirt along with her. It allows connection in a world that on its own might be devoid of meaning.