

Miscommunication in *Stillwater*: The Interplay of Social Identities, Language Barriers, and Emotional Dynamics

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Abstract

This paper analyses *Stillwater's* (2021) dialogue and action lines to demonstrate how miscommunication, specifically during heightened emotional instances, between Bill, the protagonist, and other characters is due to language barriers and emotional dynamics related to ethnic diversity. The study reveals that language difficulties hinder effective communication between Bill, an out-group member, and French residents, the in-group. Consequently, his limited language skills not only mark him as an outsider by challenging his efforts to integrate into the French culture, but also prove that language is a marker of group identity, influencing emotions, behavior, and interaction. In addition, the study demonstrates that the cultural disparities Bill encounters socially define and categorize him as an “out-group” member (American) from the perspective of the “in-group” (French), thus elucidating out-group biases and discrimination. These findings emphasize the role of language in reflecting linguistic and cultural nuances in intergroup interactions in the screenplay *Stillwater*.

Keywords: *Stillwater*, ethnic and linguistic diversity, Social Identity Theory, Integrated Threat Theory, emotional dynamics, cross-cultural interaction, intergroup conflict

1. Introduction

In 2021, Tom McCarthy co-authored the screenplay *Stillwater* with Marcus Hinchey, Thomas Bidegain, and Noé Debré. The script was later adapted into a movie, closely mirroring the original draft, in the same year and received relatively positive reviews for Matt Damon’s performance and Tom McCarthy’s direction for bringing depth and attention to the movie’s complex themes. *Stillwater* explores the challenges that may occur due to language barriers and cultural diversity. The script, “animated by cascading cultural clashes and misunderstandings, most of them involving [Bill’s] character, a taciturn, working-class middle,” addresses these issues by emphasizing how cultural disparities contribute to misunderstandings among characters and complicates their interpersonal interactions and dynamics (Hornaday). It also highlights the intricacies of navigating multiple languages and the importance of understanding diverse cultural contexts to avoid miscommunication.

The narrative revolves around Bill Baker, an oil rig roughneck from Stillwater, Oklahoma. He travels to Marseille, Southern France, to reconcile with his estranged daughter, Allison, who is accused of a crime she claims she did not commit: the murder of her roommate, Lina. She is sentenced to nine years in French prison. Determined to prove his daughter’s innocence, Bill remains in Marseille to find Akim, a person connected to Lina’s murder case. He befriends Virginie, a single French mother who sympathizes with him. Virginie plays a pivotal role as Bill’s translator in France, thus bridging the language gap he faces amid the complexities of cross-cultural interaction.

At the beginning of the script, an action line reads: “Note: at times throughout the screenplay, dialogue will be either written in French as above or in English with italics to signify that it will be spoken French” (McCarthy et al., 13). This note, underlined and written in uppercase in the screenplay, emphasizes the multilingual nature of the script. It also highlights the diverse linguistic landscape and the changeability of the characters’ cultural interactions, informing the reader of the intentional language shifts that occur in the narrative. As such, throughout the story, Bill struggles to communicate with French residents, specifically during intense moments, where emotional dynamics, including mechanisms such as filters, triggers, and defensive communication, impact cognitive thought and behavior. The language barrier and emotional dynamics impede verbal exchange and lead to confusion as he cannot express himself accurately or comprehend the nuances of French conversations.

Scenes from the script show Bill’s challenges in adapting to French culture, not just linguistically but also in

interpreting social cues associated with distinct social identities. For example, his cultural dissonance during a heated discussion on football with Maya, Virginie's daughter, reflects a lack of connection with a sport that carries significant cultural weight. Bill's statement about the players, "All they do is cry and pretend to be hurt. Like babies! You know babies!" forces Maya to defend a sport that symbolizes French national pride and cultural identity. In the script, the action lines read, "Maya is indignant, stomps her foot," and she retorts, "Non, c'est pas des bébés! L'OM c'est la meilleure équipe du monde! Ils ont des super joueurs" which translates into "No, it's not babies! OM is the best team in the world! They have great players" (McCarthy et al., p. 91). Bill's negative remark about football serves as an emotive trigger, prompting Maya's response that is indicative of being emotionally triggered. Thus, Maya's indignation highlights cultural gaps and cross-cultural dynamics.

Bill's cultural challenges is his inability and disinterest in critiquing a theatrical performance, a valued cultural activity in France. When Virginie asks for his opinion on the play, he "[thinks really hard] and admits, "I don't fucking know. I don't know shit about plays. Plus it's in French" (p. 113). Bill's uncertainty to participate in this analytical discourse triggers a response that reflects his discomfort and defensive attitude. His lack of confidence in discussing topics like theatre indicates his alienation from a society that culturally engages in artistic discussions. The action line shows Bill trying to engage with the question, yet he finds it challenging despite his efforts. In addition, while blunt, Bill's admission of ignorance indicates the differing cultural backgrounds and expectations between him and Virginie. These instances, including the discussion about football, establish Bill's status as an outsider, an American individual in a foreign social context, alienated by language barriers and cultural differences.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly studies on *Stillwater* focus on the movie adaptation rather than the written text from which it originated. For example, María Del Mar Azcona and Celestino Deleyto's article "Brief Encounter: Matt Damon in Marseille" uses a "cosmopolitan perspective to explore the consequences of the encounter between the Hollywood star and the European city" (p. 1). The article discusses how, using a spatial perspective, the film juxtaposes Damon's character, Bill Baker, an Oklahoman roughneck, with the cosmopolitan city of Marseille, France. In addition, Imed Ben Labidi's "Hollywood's Racial Order and the Re-throning of White Supremacist Identity" examines the film's portrayal of Arab Muslims as "unequal or subordinate to white people, thereby 're-throning' a white supremacist subjectivity in a period of heightened racial tension in the United States and Europe" (p. 1). It critiques the film for its negative image of Arab Muslims, given the contemporary context of racial tensions in Western societies.

However, *Stillwater*'s screenplay has yet to be researched as a valuable literary discourse that depicts language not merely as a conduit for communication but as a medium that delineates social group affiliations and determines cultural identity, reflecting the characters' emotional and cognitive state. Within *Stillwater*'s context, Bill's language barrier challenges and cultural differences during acute emotional events can be analyzed through Social Identity Theory (SIT). Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, this integrative theory of intergroup conflict proposes that an individual's social identity is influenced by intergroup interaction via three main elements: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. These characteristics categorize, identify, and compare individuals and others within social groups, distinguishing between in-groups (groups with which individuals identify) and out-groups (groups with which individuals do not identify). They also situate individuals within groups' cultural constructs, such as racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. Two final important aspects of Social Identity Theory are in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. The former concept is the tendency to favor members of one's group. In contrast, the latter refers to the tendency of in-group members to discriminate against and exhibit hostility toward individuals belonging to the out-group and reinforce the idea of the "other." This discrimination defines the dynamics of intergroup relations and leads to biases, stereotypes, and prejudices against those outside the preferred group.

This paper aims to analyse the movie's dialogue and action lines by focusing on three specific scenes, which entail English and French languages. The analysis demonstrates how miscommunication between Bill and other characters, specifically during heightened emotional instances, results from factors such as language barriers and emotional dynamics related to ethnic diversity. Using social identity theories as conceptual frameworks, the study reveals that language difficulties hinder effective communication between Bill, an out-group member, and French residents, the in-group. Consequently, his limited language skills not only mark him as an outsider by challenging his efforts to integrate into the French culture but also prove that language is a marker of group identity, influencing emotions, behavior, and interaction. In addition, the study further demonstrates that the cultural disparities Bill encounters socially define and categorize him as an out-group member (American) from the perspective of the in-group (French), thus elucidating out-group biases and discrimination. These findings

emphasize the role of language in reflecting linguistic and cultural nuances in the context of intergroup interactions and conflicts in the screenplay *Stillwater*.

3. Analysis

According to Tajfel and Turner's integrative theory, "the essential criteria for group membership, as they apply to large-scale social categories, are that the individuals concerned define themselves and are defined by others as members of a group" (p. 40). In other words, self-identification is a subjective process by which individuals consciously align themselves with specific characteristics such as ethnic background, language, and beliefs that define their group. This alignment allows individuals to experience a sense of belonging with a group based on shared attributes or experiences. In addition, society and members of other groups should recognize individuals as members of the opposite social group based on these observable social markers commonly associated with that group. Even though Social Identity Theory does not explicitly state that language is a factor in intergroup conflict, it is essential to note that language is a cultural construct and a critical factor in group inclusion or exclusion that can be used in this framework. Hence, language affects individuals' cross-cultural interactions and their sense of belonging.

In *Discourse Strategies*, John Gumperz, the prominent linguistic anthropologist, discusses cross-cultural communication and the role of language as a fundamental aspect of social, cultural, and linguistic identity. He also states that "socio-cultural differences and their linguistic reflections are more than just causes of misunderstanding or grounds for pejorative stereotyping and conscious discrimination" (p. 6). Socio-cultural and linguistic differences are integral to human diversity as they influence people's views and interactions and may cause prejudices and discrimination. In *Stillwater*, Bill's American roots and English language are the makers of his distinct social identity and create boundaries between him and other social groups. As an American unfamiliar with the distinctions of French conversations and social and cultural practices, Bill cannot communicate with the French people and maintain his identity in France as he encounters a setting that entails foreign norms, values, behavior, and communication that do not align with his own. He feels disconnected from the French residents as he finds the need to adjust to a new language and different cultural standards. Thus, this situation diminishes his confidence and shifts his self-perception from feeling competent and self-confident to feeling alienated in France.

In her review "Stillwater—A film about American stereotypes," Angelo Perera explains that the story "is a generally intriguing critique of the attempt to pigeonhole individuals or groups... and strives to bring to life the situations and conditions of the people involved across the two continents." This critique points out how individuals categorize themselves and others while ignoring the complexity of this labeling and relying on stereotypes and broad generalizations when categorizing others. Perera's description becomes evident in one of the first scenes set in France, where most of the action occurs. The hotel manager and receptionist demonstrate cultural insensitivity by categorizing Bill as an out-group member due to his American background: "C'est lui dont je t'ai parlé. Le père de l'Américaine" ("This is him. I told you about. The father of the American"; my tans.; McCarthy et al., p. 14). In this statement, there is a clear lack of acknowledgment of Bill as an individual, as the hotel manager and receptionist associate him with a social group rather than see him as an individual. The remark also restricts Bill's identity to his nationality rather than considering the cultural aspects of his individuality. This labelling is an act of "othering" as it implicitly suggests Bill's exclusion from the in-group, a form of discrimination.

One of the first scenes highlighting the challenges of cross-cultural communication and the impact of social dynamics is Bill's encounter with Souad, one of Allison's classmates. After learning from Professor Patrick Okonedo, Allison's outreach program coordinator, that Souad overheard a conversation about the murder case, Bill meets Souad at a fast food chain restaurant, *Quick*. However, Patrick warns Bill about the language barrier, noting, "Souad does not speak English very well. You will need someone to translate" (McCarthy et al., p. 42). Even though Bill resorts to Virginie for help, the encounter conversation remains intense.

An action line in the script describes Souad as a "sixteen-year old Arab woman," yet does not clarify her citizenship status (McCarthy et al., p. 52). However, the story's context implies that due to her residency in France, Souad is fluent with the local language, and familiar with the Marseille's culture and environment, thus indicating that she may be a French citizen or a resident well-integrated into French society. Familiar with the local culture and representative of the French community, Souad is discomfited and distrustful of Bill, who lacks her language skills and cultural understanding, particularly regarding power dynamics, which are based on social and cultural factors. Since language is crucial in human interaction and central to an individual's cultural identity and interpersonal socialization, it provides a frame of reference and sustains identities within a relational

context. This idea is exemplified in the scene as Bill's inability to engage in the conversation not only prevents him from gathering information to help his daughter, but also distinctly sets him apart from Souad, who is accompanied by a friend for support, and Virginie, who shares the same cultural and linguistic background. Their "exclusive interaction" relies on "unverbalized and context bound presuppositions in communication" because of their common background (Gumperz, p. 71). Virginie understands why Souad feels threatened by the possibility of being seen with Bill, who is perceived as an out-group member, in a neighbourhood populated with individuals belonging to the same social group as hers, in-group members.

Intensity climaxes in the scene when "The door opens and three young men walk in. Souad's friend clocks them [and] nudges Souad. 'Je vais avoir des problèmes à cause de toi' (I'm going to have problems because of you"; my trans.; McCarthy et al., p. 53). This specific moment symbolizes the intrusion of external social pressures and realities into the relatively contained interaction between Souad, her friend, and Bill. The scene projects an intertwining of emotional dynamics and intergroup conflict as the entrance of the young men, in-group members, creates a heightened sense of tension and danger. Souad's friend's defensive stance represents protecting her in-group identity by fighting against the possibility of being criticized or threatened by an out-group member, Bill. Also, it is a form of reinforcing the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, signalling a clear distinction between "us" (the in-group) and "them" (the out-group), often exacerbating existing prejudices and tensions. The friend's fear of potential problems at the possibility of breaking social codes proves that associating with Bill, an outsider, both culturally and linguistically, is unfavorable in a spatial setting where loyalty and trust within the community are significant. Her action upholds her group's collective identity and values, dismisses out-group point of view, and maintains the perceived superiority or righteousness of her in-group categorization.

According to Marlyn Brewer, prejudice arises from favourability toward in-group members and is linked to the social categorization of individuals. She explains that one type of this bias is focused on out-group members and "is aroused when the outgroup is perceived as a threat, not only to the self but to the integrity, interests, or identity of the ingroup as a whole. Discrimination derived from this form of prejudice is motivated more by ingroup protection (rather than enhancement) as well as antagonism toward the outgroup" (p. 697). This concept is echoed in the scenes' ending when Bill presses for more information about Akim. Souad's friend confrontational retort "Tu nous a pris pour des poucaves ou quoi ?!" (Do you think we are snitches or what?!"; my trans.) expresses Brewer's idea of in-group favoritism (McCarthy et al., p. 54). The term "poucaves" is slang for a snitch or informant and by specifically using this term, Souad's friend defends her in-group social identity against perceived external criticism, such as being labelled a snitch. Her emotional trigger demonstrates her apprehension that she and Souad may be perceived as betraying their social group by providing information to Bill. By discontinuing Bill's questioning, she stands in solidarity with her in-group members, reinforcing social boundaries between in-group and out-group members. Her action upholds her group's collective identity and values, dismisses out-group point of view, and maintains the perceived superiority or righteousness of her in-group categorization.

The scene ends with a dramatic encounter in which Virginie pleads with Bill to leave the restaurant, "That's not how it works here... It's not safe for us... Because we are not from there..." (pp. 54-55). Bill refuses to give up or press for more information as he is incapable of understanding the cues of the French lifestyle. By referring to herself and Bill as "we," Virginie equates herself with Bill by socially identifying and categorizing herself as an out-group member. A broader explanation goes as follows: French residents share a common national identity, language, and cultural norms. This shared identity categorizes them as in-group members within the general setting of the city because they have a collective sense of belonging based on these shared characteristics. However, the context changes when an ethnically and culturally French resident enters a French Arab neighborhood because the predominant culture is different in that area, as it reflects the French Arab community's culture. Thus, Virginie's status as an in-group member in the general context of the French setting shifts to an out-group member in the new context because she does not share the specific cultural, linguistic, or social norms as the people of the French Arab locality. The scenario illustrates the fluidity of social identity and group categorization where in-group and out-group statuses are not fixed but can change based on the social and cultural context.

Another emotionally charged scene emphasizing miscommunication due to difficulty understanding French cues is at the Café De La Place, where Bill and Virginie meet with a previous bar owner as part of their investigation. They show him pictures of different male individuals in the hope that he identifies one of them as Akim, the suspect Allison and Bill believe to have killed Lina. The former bar owner, who is connected to Allison's trial, plays an important role because of his racially discriminating views on French Arab individuals, which

emphasizes cultural and ethical tensions between the characters and clarifies Virginie, Bill' and the French man's moral perspective on racism. To fully understand the complexity of the scene, the complete scenario is cited below with translations:

OLD MAN: Ils débarquent ici, ils font toujours des problèmes. Ils se croient chez eux maintenant. (They show up here, they always cause problems. They think they're at home now.)

VIRGINIE (Getting pissed off): On peut rester concentrer sur les photos s'il vous plaît? (Can we stay focused on the photos, please?)

The guy turns to Bill, talks to him as to an old friend.

OLD MAN: On est pareil toi et moi, non? Vous, vous avez les mêmes soucis avec vos Mexicains, non? C'est l'invasion. (You, you have the same problems with your Mexicans, right? It's an invasion.)

Virginie doesn't translate.

BILL: What'd he say?

OLD MAN : Et puis là ça fait cinq ans aussi... Le mieux c'est que tu me montres celui que tu veux et moi je le reconnaitrai. Comme ça c'est réglé. Je ferai pareil au tribunal s'il faut. (And then it's been five years too... The best thing is that you show me the one you want and I will recognize him. That way it's settled. I'll do the same in court if necessary.)

VIRGINIE: Attendez, c'est sérieux là... (Wait, this is serious)

OLD MAN: (Shrugs) Regardez-les, ils sont tous coupables de quelque chose làdedans... (Look at them, they are all guilty of something in there...; my trans.; McCarthy et al., pp. 68–69)

In "Unveiling French Xenophobia: A Study of Prejudice against Arabs in France," Carissa Porter states that "the French perceive Arabs as symbolic threats to French culture" (p. 83). She further explains how the French people consider Arabs as rivals who have overstayed their welcome since they immigrated to France in the 1950s–1960s. In addition, in "How Arabs are Perceived in the French Imagination," Mourad Saouli states that 64% of France's population has a negative view of French residents with Arab origins due to stereotyping and prejudices against a once colonized race. Porter's and Saouli's studies reflect the man's biased comments on French Arab residents. To the old man, the male persons in the photos are Arabs and "all the same", regardless of their French residency. He does not see them as individuals but as a group, signifying a specific social identity. Thus, he categorizes himself as an in-group member, "us," while discriminating the young men into the out-group member, "them."

The previous bar owner's distinction between "us" and "them" exemplifies the dynamics of social categorization. In her article, Brewer states that one important distinction between "us" and "them" occurs when there is an "an explicit dissociation of the self from the target outgroup usually accompanied by negativity and hostility toward that group Discrimination that is derived from outgroup prejudice (hate) is actively directed at disadvantaging members of the outgroup, whether or not any personal benefit is gained in the process" (p. 696). The old man's comments reflect clear in-group favoritism and out-group bias because he portrays a preference for his cultural group and a negative attitude toward the Arab community. He also dissociates himself from the Arab community, and this aligns with the hostility towards the out-group.

In 1906, sociologist William Sumner introduced in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination as concepts intended to explain the favoring of one's group while discriminating against the other. He states that "each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exists in its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders" (p. 13). Sumner's explanation reflects the old man's ethnocentrism, where he uses his culture and ethnicity as parameters to judge other people of different ethnic groups negatively. The man's culturally biased judgment explains his eagerness to blame any French Arab male because to him, they are outsiders. In addition, his statement to Bill, "you have the same problems with your Mexicans, right? It's an invasion" highlights subtle themes of immigration, cultural disparity, and the tensions that arise from these issues, which with the story deals. Here, the man compares his country, France, to Bill's America and the Mexican immigrants to the Arab settlers. He considers himself and Bill members of the superior groups of their native countries, and his use of the term "invasion" suggests both of their experiences with the influx of immigrants, which he regards as threatening to the host country's social order. They also imply his concerns regarding the cultural, economic, or social changes, which are perceived as unfavorable, that may occur because of this influx. The man demonstrates stereotyping and prejudicial attitudes towards immigrant groups by labeling them as a collective threat while overlooking the diversity and individuality within these communities.

In her interaction with the bar owner, Virginie strongly opposes her countryman's unethical views. Her social

identity is influenced by values prioritizing tolerance, inclusivity, and rejection of prejudice. This sets her apart from the bar owner, whose social identity is aligned with exclusionary and prejudiced views. This clash of views proves that conflicts may occur within the French in-group. It also emphasizes the intricate nature of social categorization and group membership, demonstrating the complexity of in-group dynamics where internal divisions are based on differing values and beliefs. Despite sharing a common national background, Virginie and the man's social identities differ due to their contrasting attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shaped by distinct social and cultural influences. Therefore, Virginie's rejection of the in-group prejudice indicates her dissociation with the prejudiced division of the French in-group that the bar owner represents, thus categorizing her as an out-group member in this context.

It is important to note that Virginie does not translate the man's views to Bill throughout this scenario because she finds them repulsive. After ending their conversation with the bar owner, Virginie gets into another heated argument with Bill, who, at this point, does not understand what the bar owner has said due to the language barrier. Virginie expresses her anger to Bill, "I can't talk to that guy... He just wants to put an Arab kid in jail. He said he doesn't care which one" (McCarthy et al., p. 70). However, Bill disregards Virginie's objection and insists on working with racist bar owner to free his daughter. Virginie's and Bill's different reactions to the man's racist comments emphasize Virginie's ethical stance against engaging with someone who openly expresses prejudiced views, which clashes with Bill's prioritizing his role as a father over cultural or ethical considerations. The scene dramatically ends with portraying Bill's status as an out-group member:

VIRGINIE: You sound very American right now.

BILL: I am!

Virginie looks at him, almost with pity.

VIRGINIE: You're also a stranger here. You don't actually understand shit...

...

She spins, walks away. Bill just burned a bridge.

Here, the cultural divide between Virginie and Bill exacerbates their miscommunication. By calling him a "stranger," Virginie categorizes Bill as an out-group member, incapable of understanding the French local context and nuances. Unlike other scenes where Bill is considered an out-group member due to prejudices and discrimination, in this scene, his out-group status is a result of Virginie's exclusion. The final action line where she "walks away" and Bill "burn[s] a bridge" symbolizes her decision to distance herself, thus creating a boundary between their social identities. This critical moment reflects Bill's unfamiliarity with cultural differences, and his lack of understanding of social cues not only reinforces the language barrier and cultural disparity presented in the scene but also emphasizes his challenges in integrating into a foreign society.

An intense scene involving intergroup conflict is Bill's interaction with in-group members in Kallisté, a district predominantly inhabited by French Arab citizens. In the script, Bill "is summarily dismissed again and again" and advised by a man, described as African, to leave the area for his safety, "Danger for you. Go Mister you go home for you" (McCarthy et al., pp. 76–77). Ignoring the warnings, Bill continues his search for Akim and finally encounters a group of young men who attack him with profanity and physical aggression: "Bill turns just at the Fat Guy slugs him. Bill falls, off balance, ... another slugs him. And then another. Bill goes down. They all start kicking the shit out of him" (p. 78). This hostility represents their loyalty to Akim, an in-group member, and their affiliation with their social group. It also clarifies their defensive reaction to the perceived threat imposed by Bill, an out-group member who may threaten their in-group's standards, beliefs, and attitudes.

According to Robert Böhm et al., intergroup conflict occurs because individuals identify as belonging to distinct social groups. They also state that "Intergroup conflict affects the perceptions (e.g., stereotyping, prejudice), emotions (e.g., fear, hate), and behaviors (e.g., discrimination, aggression) of the individuals involved" (p. 950). In Kallisté and Akim's community, Bill's presence in a place that does not welcome outsiders and his persistent search for Akim challenge their in-group's social order and safety. They regard his intrusion, ignorance, and lack of respect for the community's autonomy as a symbolic threat to their social identity. Thus, their subsequent hostility, fueled by negative stereotyping of Bill as an outsider, is a reaction to maintaining their in-group's solidarity and unity and resisting external change.

Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan's Integrated Threat Theory explains that perceived threats often lead to discrimination and hostility towards out-group members. This theory, later developed to include psychological and behavioral reactions to perceived or actual threats, encompasses cognitive and emotional reactions, such as outgroup stereotypes, opposition to outgroup members, fear, anger, and resentment, while

behavioral responses include aggression and intergroup conflict (p. 62). Akim's community members' aggressive behavior, instigated towards Bill, is a response to the fear of interacting with someone from an out-group, specifically during an intense moment when circumstances are perceived as intrusive or threatening. This fear, which later turns to anger, is symbolic of their intergroup anxiety and explains the in-group's bias and hostility. By uniting against Bill, an outsider, the in-group members reinforce their social identity and demonstrate that their interactions with Bill result from their bond to their social group.

In the final exchange between Bill and Akim, the scene shows how the language barrier heightens the tension and emphasizes the complexities of cross-cultural communication. Bill kidnaps Akim after finding him at a football game and locks him away in the basement of Virginie's building, "Bill turns to see... Akim gagged and tied to a chair with duct tape. The chair is tied" (McCarthy et al., p. 128). At first, Bill refuses to converse with an injured Akim, who speaks limited English. However, Akim pleads desperately, "Ecoule moi. Juste écoute. S'il-teplaît. Je suis pas un méchant moi. Laisse moi partir. Je veux pas de problèmes, c'était pas ma faute!" ("Listen to me. Just listen. I am not a bad person. Let me go. I don't want problems. It wasn't my fault"; my trans.) to which Bill responds with a lack of empathy, "I don't know what you're saying" and aggression "OK. It's time to shut the fuck up now" (pp. 131, 132). Bill's response intensifies the emotional and communicative tension as he perceives Akim as a threat. The possibility of Akim running away or convincing Bill of his innocence may disrupt his loyalty and affiliation to his social identity and social group, particularly Allison. Thus, Bill's defensive and aggressive behavior towards Akim echoes the earlier scene where Akim's in-group members protected him from Bill.

Bill's inability to understand Akim's pleas not only conveys the linguistic divergence between their social groups but also deepens the emotional disconnection and escalates the conflict between them. Thus, this social categorization is an important factor in influencing how each individual perceives the other as an out-group member. In the previously analyzed scenes, the paper has discussed how both characters are considered outsiders in France, yet in different contexts. However, in this scene, the dynamic is complex because while Bill is typically an outsider in France, his control over Akim in this situation temporarily shifts the power dynamic. In a position of power, Bill becomes the in-group "us," and his perception of Akim as a threat categorizes the latter as the out-group "them."

4. Conclusion

Bill's interpersonal encounters illustrate that beyond the primary function of language as a medium for communication, it also acts as a cultural representation of diverse social identities. Thus, in Stillwater, the language barrier, inclusive of cultural disparity and emotional dynamics, becomes a symbol of the characters' different social groups, which plays a role in shaping, influencing, and impeding interpersonal communication, particularly in a cross-cultural and linguistically diverse context.

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Authors' contributions

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