# *DIPLOMATIC LANGUAGE – AN INSTRUMENT OF DISGUISING THE TRUTH IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S "HEART OF DARKNESS"*

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***Abstract:*** *The purpose of the present paper is to reveal the meaning of the double language employed by Western nations in their relationship with less advanced countries. It is of utmost importance to establish to what extent in "Heart of Darkness", diplomatic language promotes an abiding falsification of the economic, political and social reality that characterised the world at the time of Conrad's writings. Broadly speaking, the previously mentioned type of language refers to a set of polite terms used in international relations in order to alleviate the implications of a certain decision that is going to be implemented. Diplomatic language is often perceived as a form of altering the truth by creating a more positive image of the actions initiated by the great powers in distinct regions of the world. In the context of "Heart of Darkness" it is assimilated to the imperialist discourse acting as a tool that attempts to disguise the financial interests of certain European countries in a benevolent mission of civilising the Congo Free State. Inevitably there appears a conflict between words and facts, between the good intentions preached by the representatives of influential Western nations and the harsh conditions of life and work that have to be endured by the African people presented in the novella.*

*Throughout the current paper there are going to be provided numerous instances of diplomatic expressions which demonstrate the hypocrisy inherent in the Company's motivation for its presence in Africa that is in sharp contrast with the actual practices of human exploitation carried out by its workers. The events described in "Heart of Darkness" prove to be topical so it is vital for the people to be aware of the existing threat that such experiences could repeat.*

***Keywords:*** *double language, hypocrisy, human exploitation*

## Joseph Conrad's Views on Colonialism

Joseph Conrad was one of the pioneers of British anti-colonial literature by condemning in his works the cruel treatment applied by Europeans to the African native population living in the Belgian Congo. At the end of the nineteenth century, the world was dominated by the leading powers' insatiable desire for colonial expansion which was accompanied by a racist attitude meant to subjugate the personality of the local people from the territories occupied by the great western nations. Imperialist practices specific to the late Victorian era were presented to the British people as mandatory requirements of their foreign policy intended to bring prosperity to Great Britain by means of opening new commercial markets, creating job opportunities and enhancing the security of the country's frontiers. Conrad's increasing influence in English literature came as a result of his concern for the major acts of injustice that were characteristic of everyday life in places from various parts of the world. His focus on the people's sufferings represents the most significant issue dealt with in his works which had been largely ignored by his predecessors. (Zins, 2001:41)

The sufferings that Conrad had to endure while living in his home country, Poland as well as the harsh conditions which his compatriots were forced to cope with

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under foreign rule played a crucial role in his choice of publicly condemning imperialism and colonialism, two processes which caused a great deal of damage to many innocent people. In contrast to other writers who expressed their admiration for the expansionist tendencies displayed by Great Britain, Joseph Conrad drew attention to the immoral actions performed by those sent to enforce the will of such a great nation. In this sense, it stands as a proof his description of imperialism *"robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale".* The Polish-born novelist realised very well the obscure implications of the previously mentioned phenomenon which determined him to label Kurtz as the symbol of greed and decadence specific to imperialist and colonialist discourses. (Zins, 2001:48-49)

In Conrad's opinion, the state of the colonised territories represents an accurate reflection of the Europeans' level of civilisation and brings to surface their real intentions with regard to the native population's enslavement. In addition to this, it is worth mentioning Karl Marx's assertion, according to which "the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes…in the colonies where it goes naked". (Marx 1968, cited in Zins, 2001:.52) A similar point of view pertains to Jean-Paul Sartre who shares the idea that colonies provide a more truthful image of Western society. Conrad's personal experience in the Congo as the captain of a steamer made him aware of his responsibility of showing the hidden aspects of that society. *Heart of Darkness* is emblematic of the representation of European imperialism as an unquestionable evidence of barbarism. The most important idea that derives from the novella consists in the contradictory purposes of civilisation and colonialism. (Zins, 2001:52)

**The Dehumanisation of the Company's Agents**

One of the primary concerns of *Heart of Darkness* consists in establishing the closeness of the bond existing between people who come from consolidated civilised countries and civilisation itself as a value that permeates the individuals' conduct and influences their understanding of the surrounding world. At the beginning of the novella, Conrad's focus is on the effects of removing several men from their native environment and relocating them into a totally different cultural space. Taking into consideration that most of the Company's agents had completely other professions before leaving for Africa such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, the reality encountered there results to be extremely confusing for them as they are forced to deal with people who have a completely distinct set of principles and values. It may be argued that the Europeans working in Africa are practically abandoned by the Company that hired them because they have to handle on their own without having been in any way prepared for this radical change in their life. The bewilderment of the Europeans sent to the Congo is also revealed by Marlow's narration of the events which took place in that remote territory and the emphasis laid on the unreal character of the experiences lived there. By means of various methods such as mythical correspondences, literary allusions and symbolic oppositions, Marlow's journey into the heart of Africa is instilled with a sense of dream or nightmare that best illustrates his inner state throughout this adventurous voyage. (Berthoud, 1978:45)

Many of the objects and tools used effectively in Europe lose their utility and become no longer needed in the context of the African reality. An important lesson that derives from Marlow's experience in the middle of the jungle is that actions are interpreted differently depending on the situation in which they are performed. The



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meaning of numerous concepts is totally distorted in this new environment as it is the case of the word "*enemy*" which is used in relation to disoriented and powerless human beings, the term "*criminals*" comes to denominate individuals who are about to die due to various diseases, while the concept of *"law*" is regarded by the majority of the savage natives *"like bursting shells,…an incomprehensible mystery out of the sea"*. Including the notion of death acquires a vulgar significance as it begins to be perceived as an ordinary event whose frequent occurrence determines the loss of its symbolic connotation. (Berthoud, 1978:46)

Marlow is aware of the particular rules and conventions that define the European society and it is precisely this aspect that enables him to admit the existence of another type of human beings. In spite of depicting the native Africans as "*grotesque masks*", by recognising the existing distinctions between his fellow-Westerners and the local population, the British captain credits them with humanity which represents the most valuable feature of an individual. Marlow accepts cultural variety and proves to be tolerant with regard to the norms and practices which are generally considered to be unusual in the environment he comes from. This makes him put in opposition the dynamism demonstrated by the tribes of savages and the drowsiness of the European colonisers who are not capable of dealing with an unfamiliar and uncomfortable social context. Moreover, his perception of his native society is not an idealistic one which determines him not to label an alien model of organisation as aberrant. Marlow's acceptance of Africa's reality is so deep that he is not outraged by the cannibalic habit of the stokers in his steamer. This represents a further proof of the fact that such a blameable act in the western world is regarded as something natural in a totally antagonistic cultural context. (Berthoud, 1978:47)

The Company's employees are portrayed as being unreal because of their incapacity of realising which are the values and principles characteristic of their nations that they should propagate among the native people. This failure gives rise to an intolerant attitude towards any kind of behaviour that does not fall within the set of conventions and requirements specific to the European background. The main consequence of this state of facts consists in the abuses committed by the westerners who take advantage of their position of power in order to exploit the savages as mere workforce in their attempt of reaching their economic targets. The dislocation of the Company's agents from their civilised environment marks the beginning of their dehumanisation as the absence of a series of constraints that are inherent to the western world and are meant to prevent citizens from becoming criminals allows them to set free their most cruel instincts. It is in the Congo that the true nature of an individual is revealed because in Europe the law enforcement activities shape people's conduct and the penalties applied to those who disobey the rules are so severe that they discourage any intention of breaking the law. (Berthoud, 1978:48)

As it can be inferred from Marlow's interactions with the other representatives of the Company, the latter are of two types: officials who are interested only in trading as much ivory as possible in order to earn huge sums of money and agents who are also entrusted with the apparent mission of civilising the tribes of savages as it is the case of Kurtz, the chief agent of the Inner Station. The chief accountant of the Lower Station is the only character endowed with honesty and faithfulness to his profession. He manages to resist in the difficult context of the general moral degradation that is characteristic of all the Company's workers and the African society as a whole by detaching from any external influence and creating his separate universe. The most important exponent of the first category of Company's officials is the Manager of the Central Station who has



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the profile of the perfect exploiter by failing to pay proper attention to the work conditions provided to the natives and more than that it is obvious his lack of sympathy for the miserable fate of the vast majority of Africans who suffer from a shortage of drinking water and food. His only positive feature consists in his indestructible health that has helped him to get rid of all his opponents and maintain his position as a leader of the Company's tradesmen. (Berthoud, 1978:49-50)

**The Intriguing Personality of Kurtz**

Kurtz is the quintessential image of the agents whose task, at least in theory, is to instil in the local people virtues such as humanity, dignity and integrity. This glamorous personage seems to be quite the opposite of the Company's Manager by comprising many extraordinary skills and possessing a level of education far superior to that of the rest of the traders. He gives the impression that in him there are gathered all the values that form the main core of the European civilisation. He is an ardent defender of the idea that the westerners have the moral duty of contributing to the modernisation of Africa and they should take a greater interest and invest more resources in this sense. (Berthoud, 1978:52)

The most significant aspect that differentiates Kurtz's tactics from the Company's Manager's methods of handling the relation with the tribes of primitives consists in the gift of speech he possesses that enables him to be in a clear position of authority over the natives. Kurtz exerts an exceptional power of persuasion that cannot be equalled in any way by the fear set up by the other agents' use of weapons. This gift of speech is aimed to create an aura of deity to the chief of the Inner Station who starts being adulated by his admirers and is allowed to decide with regard to their destiny. Kurtz uses his rhetorical abilities in order to promote some life principles that he does not really believe in, but only claims to respect and support. Most of his speech is based on a benevolent mission of the Company's workers who have among their priorities the establishment of a new model of society founded on education, progress and order. Despite this theoretical goal, his discourse lacks substantiality as it is not doubled by consistent actions that could enhance the credibility of his presumed ideals. (Berthoud, 1978:54)

> The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (Conrad 1993, cited in Berthoud, 1978:54)

In contrast to his declarative statements, Kurtz succumbs completely and irreversibly to ivory's spell which soon transforms into his greatest concern and then into a real obsession that can no longer control. The most prodigious agent of the Company does not collect enormous amounts of ivory for the sake of it, but because its possession materialises in an immense power and influence at the highest level of the Company's leadership which explains why he is feared so much by the current Manager and his acolytes. The incredible desire for ivory and its subsequent benefits becomes so consuming that Kurtz abandons all his previous moral norms and gives in to savage rituals that are meant to demonstrate to the natives that he deserves to be held in high



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regard as their spiritual leader and above all he becomes their absolute master being the only person who has the right to decide whether one of them dies or not. The wicked influence of the ivory is best illustrated by the following excerpt "it had caressed him, and -- lo! -- he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite. Ivory? I should think so". (Conrad, 1993:121)

An additional proof of Kurtz's dominance over the entire area of the Inner Station consists in the way he relates to all the important elements that surround him. He considers that even nature and its riches should be in his own property and he is entitled to dispose of them as he wishes without having to ask someone's permission. This demonstrates once more his distorted conception of his role in this immense mechanism of the Europeans' involvement in Africa. In his moments of weakness and irrationality caused by disease, Kurtz speaks about the things that are the most precious for him "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my--" which represents a confirmation of his sense of fondness for the symbols to which he dedicated his existence. (Conrad, 1993:121) He sees himself in the impossibility of accepting to leave and lose the empire that he has built which is regarded as his greatest achievement and the most significant source of nourishment for his exacerbated vanity. His words suggest an unprecedented confidence in his power of controlling everything happens in his area of influence and besides this a self-centred approach of everything that is to be found around him.

The horrifying image of several men hanged near the camp of Kurtz in a demonstrative manner is a clear expression of the cruel and unacceptable methods used by him in relation to the native people. This type of practices cannot have any reasonable justification as they do not bring any kind of economic benefit either to the Company or to Kurtz personally. They merely represent a way of satisfying the ruler's need of reasserting his authority as well as an instrument of determining the savages to keep in mind what are the consequences of a possible disobedience. The dictatorial style of imposing his will through inhuman actions is also generated by a lack of self-control which manifests from time to time and whose result is a slaughter of innocent human beings.

> I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact, the manager said afterwards that Mr. Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. (Conrad, 1993:133)

Marlow argues that the wilderness had an overwhelming impact on Kurtz's personality as it produced major changes in his way of perceiving reality and dealing with it. The contact with a totally distinct environment governed by different rules than those he was used to is supposed to have affected his mental health by giving rise to a series of behavioural problems. He was so fascinated by the mirage of exploring such a mysterious territory and becoming the supreme icon of the people who inhabited it that he failed to pay attention to the numerous traps which were expecting him in this amazing region of the world. The fact that Kurtz considered himself indestructible and



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wanted to be treated as a legendary figure thanks to the implementation of a revolutionary means of collecting huge sums of money eventually led him to suffering a nervous breakdown. Another reason for his collapse consists in his alienation from the world he was accustomed to and furthermore it should be added the feeling of loneliness that is characteristic of him in the period of time spent in the remotest part of Africa during which he had nobody to talk with. The final decay of the most popular and influential agent of the Company seems to be the vengeance of the wilderness as a result of the defiant attitude displayed by him.

> But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude -- and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. . . .(Conrad, 1993:133)

Kurtz, the enigmatic and intriguing character of *Heart of Darkness*, considers himself to be the moral centre of the universe, all his actions being related to his own standards of morality. Kurtz dedicates his existence to an idealised concept of himself by means of which he embodies his own criteria of behaviour. His dream of civilising the African natives is wrongly understood as instead of working for its fulfilment, he is absorbed by this mirage which makes him strongly believe in his divine nature that entitles him to play the role of supreme military and spiritual commander of the savage tribes. In return, he has to join them in all their daily activities, practically becoming their fellow. (O'Brien, 1972:3)

Judging by Chris Fromm's theory according to which people are indoctrinated in believing that the real purpose of life is *"happiness, that is, maximum pleasure, defined as the satisfaction of any desire or subjective need a person may feel*", a concept called radical hedonism, it can be stated that this principle is applicable to *Heart of Darkness* as Kurtz finds himself in the situation of departing on a journey to Africa in his quest for financial prosperity. He is motivated in this struggle by a very tormenting inferiority complex generated by his poor social condition which prevents him from getting married to his Intended and having access to higher social circles. Taking into consideration the aspects presented by Fromm, it results that Kurtz is a radical hedonist. All his actions have as a final goal the accomplishment of his most passionate desires namely to grow rich, to advance in the social hierarchy, to gain the respect of his fellows and last but not least, to be loved. The achievement of Kurtz's love for his Intended is conditioned by the degree of wealth that he manages to reach which transforms him into an individual obsessed by accumulating money and eventually he no longer sees his fiancée as a human being, but as a commodity that can be bought as soon as he has the necessary amount of money. (Res, 2013:40)

**Kurtz and Charles Gould – the main exponents of "*material interests*"**

A significant aspect that deserves being discussed is represented by the similarities between Kurtz and Charles Gould, one of the main characters of *Nostromo.* First of all, it is worth saying that ivory in the case of Kurtz, respectively silver for Charles Gould are no more simple objects of trade, but became their reason to live as everything they do is in the name of collecting huge quantities of these precious



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materials. Their possession does not make them happier, on the contrary the two characters are led to destruction. Moreover, their insatiable desire for wealth also affects the relationships they have with their lovers. Despite the fact that the official motivation for Kurtz's desperate search for ivory consists in his wish of becoming worthy of his Intended, the reality shows that he is more interested in being feared and at the same time acclaimed by the natives and the other agents of the Company. Charles Gould's obsession with running the San Tome mine and transforming it into the most profitable enterprise of the country alienates him from his wife because he spends all his time striving to put his ideal into practice. Besides the similarities already stated, there is one difference in terms of the tangibility of the two protagonists' beloved women. While the Intended remains remote and unapproachable for Kurtz, Emilia Gould is always next to her husband, ready to provide him with moral support. Due to the Goulds' increasing alienation, Charles becomes as inaccessible for Emilia as the fiancée for Kurtz. (Res, 2013:41-42)

Based on Freud's statement that "the person exclusively concerned with having and possession is a neurotic, mentally sick person", it can be said that both Kurtz and Charles Gould fit in this category as their preoccupation with accumulating an immense fortune proves to be destructive not only for themselves, but also for the communities to which they belong. (Fromm 1979, cited in Res, 2013:44) In contrast to Kurtz whose degradation eventually leads to his death, Charles Gould's destructive nature brings about the death of Martin Decoud and Nostromo. In addition to this, his disruptive capacity is once again demonstrated by his intention of making sure that the command of the mine will under no circumstances be taken over by his rivals. In order to do this, he plans to destroy "the whole plant, buildings, and workshops of the mine with heavy charges of dynamite; block with ruins the main tunnel, break down the pathways, blow up the dam of the water-power, shatter the famous Gould Concession into fragments, flying sky-high out of a horrified world". (Conrad 1904, cited in Res, 2013:45) By expressing this wish with regard to the mine's fate, it becomes clear that Gould finds himself in the last stage of his decay as one's desire to own something eternally regardless of the consequences of his actions represents the most edifying evidence of that person's moral corruption.

In reference to Kurtz's lineage, it should be mentioned that his mother was half-English while his father was half-French which means that he inherited traits of character specific to both peoples. His upbringing in a British spirit and his entire formation as an individual before arriving in Africa determines Marlow assert that "*All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz*". This statement is aimed to highlight the fact that the chief of the Inner Station is the product of the European greediness and his behavioural deviations are the consequence of the policies carried out by the exponents of the imperial powers. Consequently, these entities should also take the responsibility for Kurtz's downfall and for having allowed him to indulge in immoral and abusive practices. (Conrad, 1993:122-23)

**The Ambivalence of Marlow's discourse**

In terms of the techniques employed by the colonists in their endeavour of exploiting the African tribes of savages, Marlow argues that language is the most effective of all as under the appearance of enforcing the law of the civilised world, the imperialist discourse results to be as brutal and dehumanising as the traditional weapons formerly used by invaders in order to conquer new territories. Marlow's narrative is



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characterised by his attempt of not being labelled as one which supports the arguments of colonialism. His success in detaching from the classic rhetoric of the western countries' humanitarian ideology is up to numerous interpretations depending on each individual's understanding of the events presented. (Greaney, 2004:67)

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow tries to maintain a great degree of impartiality by not fostering any of the sides formed among the colonists. As previously described, on the one hand, there are the mercenaries whose only purpose consists in taking advantage of the cheap workforce represented by the natives in order to attain their economic targets and on the other hand there is the so-called "*gang of virtue*" made up of colonists who support the idea that the imperial project has to include a series of philanthropic actions meant to bring benefits to the colonised regions. To his surprise, Marlow finds out from the brick-maker of the Central Station that he is considered to be part of the latter group of colonists being regarded as having a similar status to that of Kurtz, both of them being recommended by the same people from Europe. The narrator consciously leaves the impression to the brick-maker that his suppositions are true because he thinks that Kurtz's side is preferable to the unscrupulous ivory traders of the Company's Manager. Even though he bears a special, but inexplicable admiration for the most emblematic member of the gang, Marlow condemns the pretence of these people who claim to be preoccupied by the development of Africa and the state of its inhabitants. (Greaney, 2004:67)

Despite Marlow's publicly asserted hatred for lies, "*You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies-which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world- what I want to forget"*, he resorts to this practice due to his unwillingness of ruining Kurtz's fiancée's illusions about his beloved's bravery and kindness as well as the nobleness of his actions. (Conrad 1993:94) By his decision of not revealing to Kurtz's Intended and acquaintances the way the events that led to the prodigious agent's death actually took place, Marlow becomes accomplice to the charade staged by the great western powers with regard to their interests in Africa. He deliberately omits to invoke Kurtz's last words because he is convinced that truth will never triumph in such a profoundly perverted society. In addition to this, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* disregards his previously claimed principles and engages in misleading and telling half-truths by not handing in to a journalist Kurtz's complete report. The manuscript given by Marlow skips the ending phrase that best reflects Kurtz's conception about the fate of the Africans. (Greaney, 2004:74)

Many critics perceive Marlow as a mere spokesperson for Conrad's imperialist views and convictions, but in fact he is much more than that. A significant aspect of Marlow's personality lies in his capacity of listening to other characters. As it results from Conrad's work, the characters created by him can be placed in two categories: those who feel the need to be extremely talkative and those who are pretty reluctant to expressing their thoughts and are even disturbed by the others' verbal aggressiveness. Marlow differentiates himself from the others by his ability of combining these two characteristics. (Greaney, 2004:68)

**Conclusions**

To sum up, it needs to be said that the behaviour of the European Company's agents relocated to Africa clearly demonstrates that a state of civilisation depends very much on the general context of a society and is rather the product of a number of



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constraints imposed to the members of a community by means of very strict rules and besides this, it is also heavily influenced by the conduct of the leaders of the respective group of people. Dislocated from their known environment, the westerners lose their self-control and indulge in acts of violence and mental abuse motivated by their mission of collecting huge amounts of ivory.

The figure of Kurtz is the most obvious proof of the discrepancy existing between the values preached by the representatives of the Company to be transmitted to the indigenous population and the real practices enforced by the western workers in order to achieve their ultimate goal, that of amassing great fortunes. Although endowed with numerous exceptional qualities among which the most striking is his gift of speech, Kurtz finds himself trapped into the illusion of creating his own religion whose adherents are the native people who regard him as their supreme ruler and blindly obey his orders. Thus, the Englishman builds an empire based on the sacrifices of the Africans, but eventually this unrealistic construction falls apart and his life is ruined.

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, both Kurtz and the other ivory traders make use of diplomatic language in order to persuade the natives to support their actions, but this should be considered nothing more than a mere attempt of deceit as it has been shown in this paper.

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