

# Linguistic Obscurity in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad'ın *Karanlığın Yüreği* Adlı Eserinde Dilsel Belirsizlik

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## Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* intensively presents modernist particularity shown in the form of linguistic obscurity. This paper draws on Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutics to argue that it has latent meanings and is presented through two categories: "silenced language" and "voiced language." The former reveals the deception, death and hurt brought by colonial conquest. The latter is best exemplified by Kurtz's Intended typified as an archetype of the Victorian woman, by which Joseph Conrad intends to criticize the self-deception of many in the colonial era. In short, linguistic obscurity respectively reveals Conrad's critique of colonialism and his concern for humanity from the two different paths.

**Keywords:** Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, obscurity, silenced language, voiced language

## Introduction

In modernist literature, language is in crisis, for "its simple relationship to the world, of naming and describing, no longer appeared to apply transparently, as ambiguity, irony, misunderstanding and the ineffable seemed commonplace" (Childs, 2002, p. 62). Highly related to these modernist features, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is intensively characterized by a notable linguistic feature: obscurity. In his previous study, Caitlin Vandertop argues that it is "a form of protomodernism that seeks to undermine Victorian realism's pretensions to transparency and the stability of meaning" (2018, p. 692). This strongly isolates Conrad's work from traditional realism. On another level, Ella Ophir relates the obscurity to Conrad's inner feelings, by which she argues that "language to Conrad often feels unnervingly detached from anything of substance within or beneath it" (2012, p. 345). Therefore, the obscurity not only reveals a unique artistic feature but also Conrad's exclusive state of mind. In Frances B. Singh's article, it has been further discussed as a "hyperbolic language," and it "point[s] out that real outrages have been committed" in the Congo (2007, p. 206). Consequently, readers are highly likely to sense what Joseph Conrad intends to insinuate: the critique of colonialism.

Typically, in *Heart of Darkness*, the language of the female figures exemplifies the linguistic obscurity, and it is presented meaningfully in both silenced and voiced ways. The former can be seen in Marlow's description of the old woman's look and the latter his conversation with Kurtz's Intended. In this paper, the old woman's look is defined as a silenced language, for it conveys something meaningful in a silent way. In comparison, Kurtz's Intended eloquently expresses her faith in Kurtz. Accordingly, her language is defined as a voiced language. In what follows, this paper aims to find out the significance of linguistic obscurity by means of these two relatively separate but closely related paths.

## Silenced Language

Apart from the forms of linguistic obscurity, it must be noted that the whole story is

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narrated by Marlow, considering Schleiermacher's argument on language and mind<sup>1</sup>, here, the obscurity of silenced language possibly functions as a sign, which signifies Marlow's inner thoughts. Based on this, Schleiermacher's grammatical explication and psychological explication are employed as analytical devices. The former focuses on linguistic features, the latter inner thoughts brought by the features. Besides, Schleiermacher also regards language as "a linguistic designation" (1998, p. 9), which implies that grammatical explication precedes psychological interpretation in literary study.

In the novella, the obscurity of silenced language is presented on the occasion that Marlow is in the waiting room in the sepulchral city: "I began to feel slightly uneasy (...) the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes" (Conrad, 2006, pp. 10-11). The episode shows that Marlow feels something mysterious at this very moment, which is revealed through two crucial adjectives: "uneasy" and "ominous." Then, the two women are knitting black wool feverishly. The adverb, "feverishly," further strengthens Marlow's mysterious feeling by describing the two women's action in an abnormal way. After this, Marlow is greatly shocked by the old woman's facial expression, which seemingly insinuates something, but what it is not clear. Consequently, the scene, especially the old woman's look, produces a sense of obscurity.

The scene further brings Marlow the sense of uneasiness, which undoubtedly arises from his surroundings. This is supported by the phrase, "something ominous in the atmosphere." The phrase emphasizes the very existence of ominous signs in the material world. Thus, it is likely to support that Marlow is encompassed by uneasiness. In the following narration, Marlow endures a sense of tension, for the noun, "conspiracy," powerfully hints that Marlow is involved in an unspeakable secret and the passive voice, "I had been let into some conspiracy" (Conrad, 2006, p. 10), further mirrors that Marlow is taken into the conspiracy, not on his own will. Therefore, Marlow's uneasiness results from his surroundings. However, in Marlow's description, the two women seem unaffected. They say nothing at all. Neither can we find some words implying their opinions nor their participation in the "conspiracy". Then, why does Marlow only emphasize the male's uneasiness?

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow once said, "They live in a world of their own" (Conrad, 2006, p. 10). In a relevant study, Nina Pelikan Straus argues that Marlow is "installed in a world from which the Intended and all leisurely women are excluded" (2004, p. 204). Therefore, Marlow's opinion on women suggests that women are naive creatures and they have little contact with the external world. In this respect, the narrator Marlow is implying that it is men who have connection with the external world. This further highlights males' participation in the "conspiracy" that made the experiencing Marlow uneasy. Mariwan Hasan et al. argue that in modernist writings the emphasis of anxiety and insecurity is a very notable feature, "which differs modern age from Victorian mood which concentrates on confidence and assurance" (2021, p. 37). Therefore, Marlow's uneasiness is not only a mirror of the anxiety and insecurity of his sex, but also of his age.

Behind this sense of uneasiness, a sense of uncertainty also arises. He said, "I don't know—something not quite right" (Conrad, 2006, p. 10). Therefore, in a narrative order, Marlow's sense of uncertainty arises after his uneasiness, which demonstrates a progressive course. Besides, quasi simile can also be found: "It was just *as though* I had been let into some conspiracy" (Conrad, 2006, p. 10). The construction, "as though," renders Marlow's following description suspicious. Fetson Kalua points out that Marlow "displays hesitancy and uncertainty about what he sees and speaks" (2014, p. 13); Therefore, Marlow seems to

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<sup>1</sup> Schleiermacher admits that language demonstrates the utterer's thoughts. See *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*.

hint: "I feel I am in a conspiracy, but the feeling may not be true; I don't know if I am right, but I think something seems not quite right. Based on this, a sense of uncertainty is presented" (Conrad, 2006, p. 10).

Then, by delivering his sense of uncertainty, what does Marlow intend to do? Ian Watt argues that "*Heart of Darkness* embodies more thoroughly than any previous fiction the posture of uncertainty and doubt and one of Marlow's functions is to represent how much a man cannot know" (2004, p. 174). This echoes the adjective, "unknown," in the description of the scene. So, it seems that the narrator Marlow attempts to show the unknown in the experienter Marlow's upcoming journey. To sum up, Marlow's sense of uncertainty is based on uneasiness. Therefore, the above analysis proves that the obscurity of silenced language, namely the sign, reveals itself on the basis of the sense of uneasiness and uncertainty in a progressive way.

Bernard J. Paris argues that in *Heart of Darkness*, there are two Marlows: the younger Marlow "who is the subject of the tale and the older Marlow who narrates it" (2005, p. 20). What makes this distinctive and clear is the grammatical features presented in two sentences: the first one is "I began to feel slightly uneasy." The second one is "I don't know—something not quite right." Apparently, the former is simple past tense, the latter simple present. According to Wen Bing and Tang Shuhua, simple past tense refers to an action happened in the past and represents a person's moment in the past (2019, p. 69), whereas simple present tense refers to an action happened in the present moment, which represents a person's current situation (2019, p. 46). As a result, the first sentence is related to the younger Marlow and the second the older Marlow. Based on this, the analysis of Marlow's understanding of silenced language splits into two paths: one to the younger Marlow, the other to the older Marlow.

Largely influenced by Schleiermacher's assertion on psychological explication, Marlow's description of silenced language can be understood from two perspectives. The first one is Marlow's moment of life at which he perceives the silenced language. The second one is his moment of life at which he understands the silenced language. The former corresponds to the younger Marlow, the latter the older Marlow.

First, focusing on the younger Marlow, we see a Marlow who is unaware of what will happen in the future. Even feeling uneasy and ominous, he does not change his determination to embark on the mission. Marlow observes the old woman carefully, paying close attention to her posture, "sat on her chair"; her slipper, "flat cloth"; her headwear, "starched and white"; her facial expression, "swift and indifferent" and her glasses, "silver-rimmed." All these, no matter phrasal verbs or phrasal adjectives, are telling us that Marlow is, in this uneasy and ominous atmosphere, highly alert to his surroundings. This may lay a foundation for his tremendous shock when he sees Kurtz for the first time.

Lao She argues, "Conrad cuts the narrative process into pieces, and the narration jumps, time and again, backward and forward" (An, 2018, p. 35). Accordingly, it seems that Marlow's sense of uneasiness is cut into two parts by his observation of the old woman. Evidence can be found in the adjective, "uneasy," and the verb, "troubled" from two parts separated by Marlow's observation of the old woman. Both adjectives reflect Marlow's feelings, so they connect the two parts together. Furthermore, Marlow's observation connects his uneasiness with the old woman's look. In consequence of this, her silenced language hints at Marlow's journey into the unknown.

Second, different from the younger Marlow, the older Marlow has "a sober realization of the darkness" (Galef, 1990, p. 135). Bernard J. Paris argues that Marlow "is trying to produce an effect on his audience" (2005, p. 55). Then, what effect does Marlow try to produce? For one

thing, as Peter Childs argues, “Conrad’s main objective is to put us into intense sensory contact with the events” (2002, p. 179), so the effect Marlow tries to produce might be “intense and direct sensory contact” with his uneasiness. In other words, Marlow tries to produce an intense and direct sensory contact with the secret laying deep in the dark Continent.

Then, how does Marlow produce the effect of intense and direct sensory contact? According to Schleiermacher, “descriptions of journeys can be understood equally as a manifestation of the mind of the travelers and of those who are doing the describing” (1998, pp. 102-103), so the older Marlow’s utterance manifests his mind which connects him with the younger Marlow. Because of this, by reading the older Marlow’s narration, readers can sense the younger Marlow’s uneasiness. In this way, readers have an intense and direct sensory contact with the younger Marlow’s uneasiness, and words become a bridge of thoughts. This can be justified by the simple present tense: “I am not used to such ceremonies; I don’t know—something not quite right” (Conrad, 2006, p. 10). By saying these, the older Marlow directly tells his audience what he is thinking right now and he is trying to show them his sober realization towards the darkness in the Congo through his sense of uneasiness back on that day.

The other effect that the old Marlow tries to produce is his implication of the falsehood of his childhood belief. Rino Zhuwarara argues that “Marlow himself is driven into Africa by his desire to fulfil a childhood dream about the Congo” (2004, p. 223). Patrick Brantlinger argues that “Africa was a setting where British boys could become men but also where British men could behave like boys with impunity” and “a great testing—or teething—ground for moral growth and moral regression” (2004, p. 71). Therefore, Marlow’s journey relates his childhood to his adulthood and Africa becomes a place to testify his childhood dream. Marlow, “after his return to Brussels, ‘the sepulchral city’ (Conrad, 2006, p. 70), experiences mental and physical decline” (Ahn, 2019, p. 714). Therefore, when the old Marlow is narrating the story, he is aware of what happened in the Congo. As Rino Zhuwarara claims before, Marlow was “driven into Africa by his desire to fulfil a childhood dream about the Congo” (2004, p. 223). Thomas Dilworth argues that it is “the idea,” namely the faith in colonial conquest, that makes Marlow and his audience deceive themselves (1987, p. 521). In this way, through his failed chase of his childhood dream, Marlow intends to show us the deception of colonial conquest and the deception drove him to chase his childhood dream. By means of this, Marlow implies the falsehood of his childhood belief of conquest and exploitation.

In his article, Jonah Raskin discussed Conrad’s change towards great powers. He mentions that “the earlier Conrad believed the rhetoric of colonialism, while the later suspected that greed and thirst for power lay behind claims to progress” (1967, p. 118). So, the two Marlows very likely implies the two stages of Conrad’s attitude towards colonial conquest: the younger Marlow is the one who was in belief of the justification of colonialism; the older Marlow is the one who suspects the truthfulness of colonialism. Therefore, the old woman’s silenced language functions as a sign which signifies two essential meanings: one represents Marlow’s journey to the unknown under the deception of colonial conquest. The other is the older Marlow’s eventual understanding of the cause. Jonah Raskin also regards *Heart of Darkness* as “a criticism of colonialists in Africa” (1967, p. 113) and “every single action in the story is doomed to failure” (Amara, 2019, p. 7). Additionally, “most men who pass through their door [the door guarded by the two women] are bound to either meet their deaths or undergo the most traumatic experience of their lives” (Saeedi, 2015, p. 551). Therefore, the obscurity of silenced language in fact implies that colonial conquest brings nothing, but deception, death and hurt.

## Voiced Language

In a sharp contrast to the old woman's silenced language, Kurtz's Intended's conversation with Marlow reveals a voiced language. In this paper, what is considered is not its phonetic features, but its way of presentation and its underlying meaning. As "a gentlewoman of an industrialized, imperialist society" who loves Kurtz (Dilworth, 1987, p. 520), Kurtz's Intended has also been discussed exhaustively. For instance, Thomas Dilworth regards her as a possessor of Kurtz to the very end of his life (1987, p. 519). He also comments that she "believes in the elevated ideals that ostensibly justified Kurtz's participation in Belgian imperialism in the Congo" (2013, p. 326). This confirms that Kurtz's Intended is created as a disciple faithful to colonial conquest and her voiced language might signify something relevant. Similarly, Patrick Brantlinger argues that "Marlow's lie leaves Kurtz's Intended shrouded in the protective darkness of her illusions, her idol worship" (2004, p. 76). Besides, Kurtz's Intended is not only seen as an emblem of a kind of "horror" (Straus, 2004, p. 206), but also a woman isolated from the external world and "frozen in time" (Saeedi, 2015, p. 545). Apparently, commentators have realized her particularities. However, they seem to pay more attention to her symbolic meanings, rather than her utterance itself. Given this, this paper defines it as a voiced language and argues that the obscurity of it functions as a sign, reveals her nature and signifies the deception of colonial conquest.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz's Intended appears as "an emblematic token of civilization" (Saeedi, 2015, p. 544) at the very end of the novella. In this closing chapter, the obscurity of the Intended's voiced language is distinctively presented in a conversational style: "I laid the packet gently on the little table and she put her hand over it. ... "You knew him well," (...) "You knew him best," I repeated (Conrad, 2006, p. 74).

Obviously, the episode demonstrates a complete but failed turn-taking.<sup>2</sup> It is complete because there are two indispensable speakers: Marlow and the Intended; it is failed because Marlow in fact conveys nothing at all. In the beginning, the Intended seems to be in the grief of Kurtz's death, which is seen in the phrasal noun: "mourning silence." Nevertheless, she seems to continuously and progressively brag Kurtz's positive influence over others, which is verified by the subsequent two verbs, "admire" and "love." In Merriam-webster dictionary, "admire" is "to feel respect and approval for (someone or something)"<sup>3</sup> while "love" means a "strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties" and the "affection based on admiration."<sup>4</sup> Thus, admiration precedes "love" and "love" is based on admiration. This proves the continuous and progressive features of the Intended's utterance, which confirms that the Intended has unrealistic confidence over Kurtz. Besides, from a grammatical point of view, the two verbs are predicates and transitive verbs. Their objectives are the same: Kurtz. This proves that in the Intended's belief, it is Kurtz who must be admired and loved. Furthermore, the following repetitive exclamatory sentence, "How true!" further exposes her deviation from reality. According to Cambridge English Dictionary, exclamatory sentence is a sentence containing a strong emphasis<sup>5</sup>, so they can be seen as her emphasis of her unrealistic confidence. Due to these, her voiced language is built on subjective falsehood and pretension. Schleiermacher argues that "without words, the thought is not yet completed and clear" (1998, p. 8). However, in this context, although the Intended's voiced language is constituted by words, its essential meaning is not clear: what does her voiced language signify? In other words, the obscurity

<sup>2</sup> This term can be found in George Yule's *The Study of Language*. 5th edition, on page 143, published by Cambridge University Press in the year of 2014.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/admire>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/love>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/exclamatory-sentence>.

of her voiced language functions as a sign. Yet, what it signifies is not clear.

By adopting Schleiermacher's grammatical explication, it is possible to perceive the essentiality of her voiced language. On the whole, there are three vital features characterizing the conversation and demonstrate the ultimate meaning of the obscurity. The first one is syntactical feature. For instance, the Intended uses declarative sentences, such as "You knew him well"; "And you admired him!" It seems the Intended is stating a fact: Marlow has a close relationship with Kurtz. However, in fact, their relationship is not as intimate as the Intended believes. Consequently, this linguistic feature reveals the Intended's subjectivity. Apart from the declarative sentences, the tag question: "Was it?" is also notable. By saying this, the Intended is not only trying to emphasize Kurtz's importance, but also the authenticity of her faith in Kurtz. Moreover, the Intended interrupts Marlow by adding, "Love him," to his utterance. On the one hand, it seems that this is the content she wants to hear. On the other hand, she is anxious to overtake Marlow's utterance. Thus, this corresponds to Thomas Dilworth's argument: she "dominates the interview" (1987, p. 513). Thus, it is reasonable to believe that her utterance reflects her dominance over the interview. Again, there are more external features. For one thing, there is no phatic communion.<sup>6</sup> Neither does she inquire the relationship between Kurtz and Marlow. As soon as she sits down, she says, "You knew him well." So, it seems that she knows everything about them and there is no need to ask. Consequently, her overconfidence reflected through her dominance over the interview can be seen as her alienation from the truth of Kurtz's depravity. However, the extreme eloquence of the Intended brings a doubt: Why does she behave in this way?

To begin with, the Intended's utterance likely mirrors her inner thoughts. Some notable features may support this point of view. The first one is the adverb, "well," in her utterance: "You knew him well." It seems that the Intended is sure that Marlow has an intimate relationship with Kurtz. Then, in her following utterance, she says that "it was impossible to know him [Kurtz] and not to admire him [Kurtz]." Here, she uses the verb, "admire," to hint that Marlow must admire Kurtz, which is in fact merely her subjective view. After this, the Intended interrupts Marlow with the verb, "love." As she tries to express the idea that it was impossible not to love Kurtz, her subjective interpretation again is shown to us. Besides, what is more notable is that her insinuation is progressive and it seems that she is trying to persuade Marlow to believe in Kurtz. In other words, the Intended is trying to persuade Marlow to believe in what she believes. In addition, the Intended claims that "I knew him best." She uses the superlative degree, "best". This also reveals the Intended's overconfidence. However, she is confined within her house and unaware of the external world, which renders her as the embodiment of "the simplistic notion of the Victorian 'Angel in the House'" (Morgan, 2007, p. 1). Consequently, the obscurity of her voiced language reveals her naive nature, which further exemplifies her as an archetype of the Victorian woman.

Then, by presenting her naivety, what does Marlow intend to convey? Bernard J. Paris argues that Marlow "is motivated less by loyalty to Kurtz than by his feeling that women cannot deal with the truth and that the unreal world in which they live must be preserved" (2005, p. 53). Therefore, Marlow intends to show how women treat the physical world and why they must be prevented from truth.

This intention results in his distinctive behavior in his conversation with the Intended. This is the third notable feature. During the interview, Marlow intentionally avoids answering

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<sup>6</sup> Words, phrases or sentences concerning greetings or opening statements. e.g. How are you? Good morning!

the Intended's "questions."<sup>7</sup> For instance, when the Intended says, "you knew him well," Marlow uses the noun, "intimacy," to respond. Then, she expects Marlow to admit that he admires Kurtz, but Marlow uses the adjective, "remarkable". Moreover, in response to the Intended's interruption, Marlow says nothing. This is seen in the phrase: "silencing me into an appalled dumbness." All these violate the Cooperative Principle (The Maxim of Relation), and Marlow seems to shun intentionally, so in fact their conversation fails and nothing is exchanged at all.

In fact, Marlow responds by mimicking. This can be seen in Marlow's repetition that "you knew him best" (Conrad, 2006, p. 74). Then, why is Marlow "mimicking?" Florence H. Ridley argues that Kurtz's Intended is "a symbol of all he [Kurtz] had meant to do, one with the noble plans he carried out to Africa, his painting of a figure bearing light, his report for the Suppression of Savage Customs" (1963, p. 50). According to Schleiermacher, "speaking is the external side of thought" (1998, p. 7). Therefore, Marlow's "mimicking echo" can be seen as his acquiescence in her connection with the darkness. Besides, Marlow says, "with every word spoken, the room was growing darker" (Conrad, 2006, p. 74). In this way, Kurtz's Intended is connected with the darkness. The comparative degree, "darker," echoes the "black" wool of the two women at the "door of darkness." Pouneh Saedi argues that this is "a color later on used to describe the singularity of Marlow's experiences on the other continent" (2015, p. 552). Because of this, the connection between the Intended and the darkness in the Congo becomes clear.

Then, why does Marlow hint at the connection? Thomas Dilworth argues that the Intended "may be a kind of lie" (1987, p. 518). Thus, Marlow realizes that the Intended is deceiving herself and her idealized ideas are "heavily eroded by the obscure currents of self-deception" (Ophir, 2012, p. 342). In this sense, for Marlow, her voiced language becomes "a means of deception" (Paris, 2005, p. 70). Consequently, the obscurity of the Intended's voiced language not only reveals her naive nature but also the deception of colonialism.

## Conclusion

On the basis of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, although the means of expression of silenced language and voiced language are different, they both function as signs that signify Conrad's critique of colonialism and his concern for humanity within certain historical background. The former, in a silenced way, criticizes colonial conquest based on Marlow's life of two stages. The latter, in a voiced way, presents the universal deception of colonialism upon the people of Conrad's era. Consequently, in *Heart of Darkness* the obscurity, namely the sign, not only demonstrates Marlow's perception of the physical world, but also reveals Conrad's concern for people's inner world. Ultimately, it enlightens that what is presented is not necessarily true and we need to pay more attention to details in order to extrapolate the truth of our world. Additionally, in this paper, only the obscurity of language is selected as an example. To gain more insight into the obscurity of *Heart of Darkness* and its implications, other focuses and theories might be indispensable in the future studies.

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<sup>7</sup> Although the Intended speaks in a definite voice, her utterances can be seen as a form of questions without the use of interrogation.

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