THE PRAGMATICS OF COLONIAL DISCOURSE: SPEECH ACTS AND IMPLICATURE IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatics of colonial discourse in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, with a focus on how speech acts and conversational implicatures construct, sustain, and complicate representations of imperial power. Drawing upon Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979), Grice's theory of implicature (1975), and politeness/facework frameworks (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the research analyses Conrad's novella through a qualitative textual methodology supported by corpus-stylistic tools. The findings reveal that Company officials rely on authoritative assertives and bureaucratic euphemisms to normalise violence, while directives and commissives enforce colonial hierarchy through orders, threats, and promises. Kurtz's eloquence exemplifies expressive and performative rhetoric that seduces and legitimises appropriation, culminating in the ambiguous exclamation "The horror!" which functions as an illocutionary climax. Africans, by contrast, are pragmatically silenced through reported speech and omission, their presence reduced to cries or gestures that generate an implicature of voicelessness. Marlow's narration further destabilises meaning by flouting conversational maxims, producing ironic implicatures that simultaneously critique and reproduce imperial ideology. Overall, the study concludes that Heart of Darkness enacts colonial power not only thematically but pragmatically: through speech acts that normalise domination, implicatures that obscure accountability, and silences that marginalise the colonised. By bridging postcolonial literary criticism with linguistic pragmatics, this research offers a replicable framework for analysing how language performs power in colonial and postcolonial texts.

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness*, pragmatics, speech act theory, implicature, colonial discourse

Introduction

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a tightly controlled novella, first published in serial form in 1899 and later collected in 1902. It narrates Charles Marlow's voyage up an unnamed African river to the Inner Station, where the enigmatic Kurtz has become both a symbol of imperial excess and a site of moral collapse. The text uses framed narration, dense symbolism and sustained tonal shifts to interrogate European representations of Africa, the corrupting effects of colonial commerce, and the instability of moral categories that underpin the imperial project (Conrad, 1899/1902).

Heart of Darkness has long been read as a critique of nineteenth-century imperialism, even as it has provoked fierce debate about Conrad's own positionality and racial attitudes. Critics from different theoretical vantage points have read the novella alternately as an indictment of colonial brutality and as a text that reproduces dehumanizing images of Africans; Chinua Achebe's influential critique foregrounds the novel's representation of Africa as "the other" and accuses Conrad of participating in racist discourse, while other critics defend Conrad's

ambivalence and narrative complexity as essential to an anti-imperial reading (Achebe, 1977). These competing readings testify to the way *Heart of Darkness* stages, performs and problematizes colonial discourse rather than simply describing it.

Pragmatics, the branch of linguistics concerned with language use in context, offers tools that are especially well-suited for analysing how colonial meanings are produced through language. Speech-act theory (Austin 1962; developed and summarised in contemporary accounts) distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of utterances and thereby helps to show how utterances in literary narratives do things: they assert, command, blame, justify, or naturalise power relations rather than merely describing them (Austin, 1962). At the same time, H. P. Grice's account of conversational implicature and the Cooperative Principle explains how meaning can be carried indirectly, how what is *implied* rather than what is *said* can index ideological commitments, presuppositions and social hierarchies in discourse (Grice, 1975). Together, these pragmatic frameworks allow a reader to trace how power is performed in the text through both explicit speech acts and the implicatures generated by conversational flouting, presupposition and pragmatic inference.

Scholars of literary pragmatics and stylistics (for example, Leech and other pragmatists) have argued that pragmatic categories, such as politeness, presupposition, implicature, and illocutionary force, can be fruitfully applied to literary narration and dialogic exchange to reveal latent ideological work. Pragmatics permits a fine-grained, empirically oriented reading that complements formal and ideological critique: while close reading identifies patterns of imagery and thematic motifs, pragmatic analysis reveals *how* characters' utterances, narrator interventions, and gaps in reported speech generate particular inferences about race, sovereignty, and legitimacy (Leech, 1983). Applying pragmatic concepts to *Heart of Darkness* promises to make visible the micro-mechanisms by which colonial discourse is reproduced, naturalised or questioned within the narrative.

The present research proposes a pragmatics-informed reading of *Heart of Darkness* that focuses specifically on speech acts and conversational implicatures as vehicles of colonial discourse. The study seeks (1) which illocutionary forces (assertion, attribution, denunciation, etc.) recurrently appear in narratorial and dialogic passages about the African interior and its inhabitants; (2) how implicatures arising from narrator omission, ironic understatement, and reported speech contribute to representations of African agency and European authority; and (3) whether pragmatic patterns in the text support a view of Conrad as critiquing imperialism, reproducing colonial ideology, or performing both ambivalently. Methodologically, the study combines close stylistic reading with pragmatic theory (speech-act analysis and implicature diagnostics) to map how meaning is produced at the level of utterance, narration and conversational exchange. By foregrounding micro-pragmatic processes, the research aims to contribute a precise linguistic account of how *Heart of Darkness* achieves its ideological effects and why the novella continues to generate divergent critical responses (Conrad, 1899/1902; Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983; Achebe, 1977).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge the gap between literary criticism and linguistic pragmatics by examining Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of speech acts and implicature. While much scholarship has explored the novel's colonial ideology, racial representations, and narrative ambiguity, few studies have systematically applied pragmatic frameworks to uncover the micro-level workings of discourse that shape these ideological tensions. By foregrounding how illocutionary forces and conversational implicatures construct, sustain, or subvert colonial power relations, this research highlights the subtle linguistic mechanisms through which imperial authority and racial hierarchies are articulated in the text. Such an approach not only enriches our understanding of Conrad's

novella but also contributes to broader debates in postcolonial studies, discourse analysis, and literary pragmatics, offering a replicable model for analysing colonial discourse across other scholarly works.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse how speech acts in Heart of Darkness construct, legitimise, or challenge colonial authority and ideological power relations.
2. To investigate how conversational implicatures in the novella contribute to implicit meanings, silences, and ambiguities that shape the representation of colonial discourse.

Research Questions

1. How do speech acts in *Heart of Darkness* reflect, reinforce, or contest the power structures embedded in colonial discourse?
2. In what ways do conversational implicatures within the novella generate implicit meanings that reveal the ideological tensions of imperialism?

Literature Review

Due in large part to its depictions of race, empire, and the moral ambiguities of imperialism, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902) has long been considered one of the most contentious works of contemporary literature. Critics have emphasised its ideological positioning and narrative complexity ever since it was published. The novella has been a rich source of interpretive discussion due to its framed narration, symbolic richness, and rhetorical density (Watts, 1983). The majority of academics concur that Conrad's story cannot be separated from the imperial setting in which it was created, and that ideological conflicts are an integral part of its literary form (Brantlinger, 1985).

The most influential intervention in Conrad studies was Chinua Achebe's essay *An Image of Africa* (1977), which condemned *Heart of Darkness* as a racist text that denies Africans subjectivity and voice. Achebe argued that Conrad reduces Africans to "props" and perpetuates dehumanising stereotypes (Achebe, 1977). His critique sparked decades of debate. Defenders of Conrad, such as Caryl Phillips (2003), counter that the novel reveals the hypocrisy of imperialism through irony and ambivalence, rather than celebrating empire. Similarly, Edward Said (1993) situates *Heart of Darkness* as both complicit in and critical of imperial discourse, reflecting the cultural contradictions of European colonialism. Thus, postcolonial scholarship underscores that the novella simultaneously critiques and reproduces imperial ideology (Parry, 1983; Hawthorn, 2007).

Parallel to postcolonial approaches, stylistic and discourse-analytic studies have examined how Conrad's language encodes ideological meaning. Leech and Short (1981) highlight how stylistic choices, lexical patterning, foregrounding, and speech presentation shape reader interpretation. Simpson (1993) demonstrates that point of view and transitivity patterns in *Heart of Darkness* reinforce the unequal distribution of agency between Europeans and Africans. Similarly, Fowler (1996) shows that linguistic structures, such as nominalisations and passivisation, serve ideological functions in colonial discourse. These studies suggest that the ideological content of Conrad's text is deeply embedded in its stylistic fabric.

Pragmatics provides theoretical resources for exploring how language performs rather than merely describes. Austin's (1962) speech act theory distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, allowing critics to analyse utterances as actions. Searle (1979) further elaborates on speech-act categories, assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives that can be applied to fictional dialogue. Grice's (1975) theory of implicature and maxims shows how indirect meaning arises from conversational flouting. Leech's (1983) politeness maxims explain how euphemism, mitigation, and indirectness function as strategies of power. These frameworks have been widely used in literary pragmatics (Culpeper, 2001; Black, 2006).

Several studies have applied pragmatic approaches to Conrad's novella. Brantlinger (1985) observes that Conrad dramatises imperialism's contradictions through the rhetorical power of language, particularly in Kurtz's eloquence. Miller (1985) emphasises the role of irony and implicature in Marlow's narration, which destabilises moral certainty. More recent work in stylistics (Toolan, 1998) examines how Marlow's discourse produces implicatures that both critique and reinforce imperial ideology. Hooper (1992) explores silences and omissions, arguing that African characters are systematically deprived of speech, producing a pragmatic implicature of voicelessness. Achebe's critique thus finds empirical support in linguistic analysis: the absence of African voices functions not just thematically but pragmatically as a silencing strategy.

Pragmatics also illuminates how colonial discourse masks violence through politeness and euphemism. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness strategies helps explain why Company managers describe atrocities as "administrative difficulties" or "unsound methods." These face-saving illocutions neutralise responsibility while sustaining institutional legitimacy (Leech, 1983). As Thomas (1995) argues, politeness in institutional discourse often serves to reinforce hierarchies rather than mitigate them. Within *Heart of Darkness*, this pragmatic strategy reframes coercion as technical or managerial language, thereby naturalising exploitation.

In recent decades, corpus linguistics has been applied to literary texts to quantify stylistic and pragmatic patterns. Mahlberg (2013) demonstrates how corpus stylistics can reveal recurrent lexical and speech-reporting patterns in Conrad's fiction. Such methods show, for example, the predominance of reporting verbs like *cry* and *yell* in representing Africans, compared to propositional speech verbs like *say* or *declare* for Europeans. This distribution supports the claim that pragmatic silencing is structurally embedded in Conrad's text (Semino & Short, 2004). Empirical and corpus-based methods, therefore, complement close reading by providing replicable evidence of pragmatic asymmetries.

Despite significant contributions, a clear research gap remains. Much postcolonial criticism has been thematic, focusing on ideology without detailed pragmatic analysis. Conversely, stylistic studies have noted patterns but rarely integrated speech-act theory, implicature, and politeness systematically across the text. Few studies operationalise pragmatic categories with empirical rigour, and corpus-based quantification of illocutionary types in *Heart of Darkness* remains scarce. Moreover, little research has explored reader-response empirically to test how contemporary readers resolve the implicatures embedded in Marlow's ironic narration. Addressing these gaps, the present study undertakes a systematic pragmatic analysis of *Heart of Darkness*, applying speech-act and implicature frameworks to demonstrate how colonial discourse is enacted at the level of communicative practice.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by pragmatics and stylistics to analyse the colonial discourse in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The methodology is interpretive rather than experimental, privileging in-depth textual analysis over numerical generalisation. Pragmatics provides the analytical framework, while literary stylistics grounds the practical application to Conrad's language.

Research Design

The research follows a textual analytic approach within the broader qualitative paradigm. It focuses on examining how linguistic forms in the novella function as speech acts and generate conversational implicatures. Since colonial discourse operates through subtle rhetorical and linguistic choices, qualitative textual analysis allows for a nuanced interpretation of language use in context (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Data Selection

The primary data for the study is Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1902). To ensure systematic coverage, the entire text is included as the corpus of analysis. However, analytical attention is focused on passages where characters speak, where Marlow reports or summarises speech, and where the narrator's commentary generates implicatures about Africa, Europeans, or the imperial enterprise. These portions of discourse are chosen because they contain the richest pragmatic material for studying illocutionary force and implicature.

Analytical Framework

Two main pragmatic theories guide the analysis:

1. **Speech Act Theory** (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979): All utterances are classified according to illocutionary force (assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives). This categorisation allows the study to identify which speech acts dominate in the representation of Europeans versus Africans and how these acts support or challenge colonial authority.

2. **Conversational Implicature** (Grice, 1975): Instances where speakers flout or exploit conversational maxims (quality, quantity, relation, and manner) are analysed to determine the implicatures generated. Special attention is given to silences, ellipses, and ironic statements, as these often carry significant ideological weight.

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) is also drawn upon to interpret face-threatening acts, mitigation strategies, and the performance of hierarchical relations in colonial encounters.

Theoretical Framework and Analysis Process
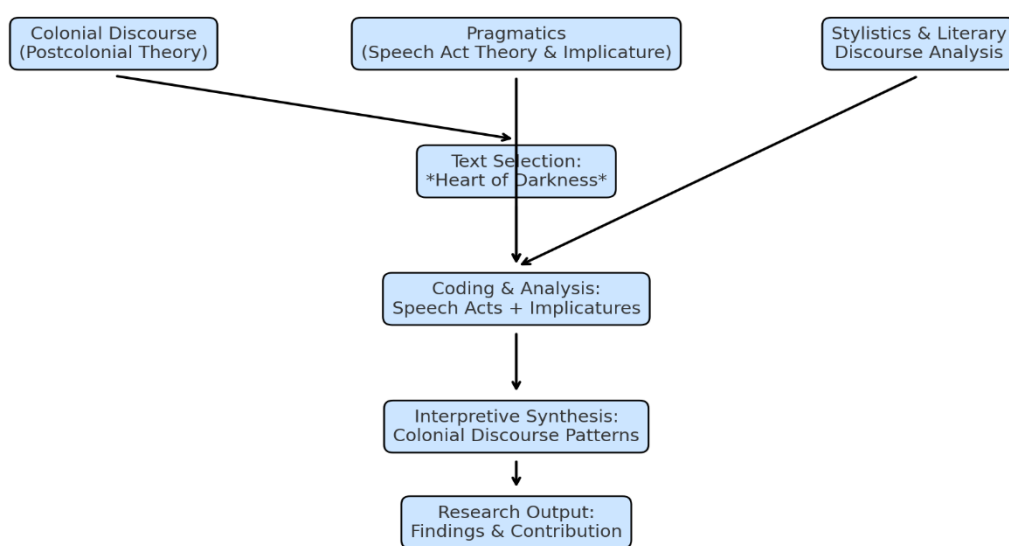
Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. **Coding of Utterances:** All speech-related passages are extracted and coded for speech act type. Narratorial interventions and reported speech are also included.

2. **Identification of Implicatures:** Passages that appear elliptical, ironic, or maxim-flouting are examined for their implicatures. These are then interpreted in relation to colonial discourse.

3. **Interpretive Analysis:** The coded results are synthesised to identify recurrent pragmatic patterns such as the dominance of assertives in colonial authority discourse, or the prevalence of silences in representing African voices.

To enhance reliability, coding is cross-checked by consulting existing pragmatic taxonomies and secondary scholarship on literary pragmatics.

Supplementary Corpus Methods

Although primarily qualitative, the study incorporates corpus-stylistic support using tools such as AntConc. Speech-reporting verbs, modal verbs, and collocations related to Africans and Europeans are quantified to reveal patterns that complement the pragmatic interpretation. This triangulation strengthens the validity of the analysis by showing that qualitative insights align with measurable linguistic trends.

Ethical Considerations

As this study is based on published literary texts, no human participants are involved. However, ethical responsibility is acknowledged in engaging critically with sensitive issues of race, imperialism, and representation, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in rigorous analysis and scholarly respect.

Justification of Method

The combination of pragmatic analysis and stylistics is justified because it allows the study to move beyond thematic interpretations toward a micro-level understanding of how language enacts colonial power. This approach bridges the gap between postcolonial literary criticism and linguistic pragmatics, producing a replicable model for analysing discourse in colonial and postcolonial texts.

Data Analysis

This chapter presents the pragmatic analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with particular attention to how speech acts and conversational implicatures construct and reproduce colonial discourse. Drawing upon Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979), Grice's theory of implicature (1975), and politeness frameworks (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987), the analysis investigates how illocutionary forces assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives operate within the novella to perform ideological work. The study also explores how omissions, reported speech, and maxim floutings generate implicatures that obscure responsibility, silence colonised voices, or sustain narrative ambivalence. By coding and interpreting key passages from the text, the chapter demonstrates that *Heart of Darkness* enacts colonial power not only through its thematic content but also through the micro-pragmatic operations of discourse.

Authoritative Assertives that Naturalise Conquest

One of the most striking pragmatic features of *Heart of Darkness* is the recurrent use of authoritative assertives speech acts that present colonial expansion not as debatable, but as matter-of-fact, routine, and institutionally sanctioned. Assertives function by committing the speaker to the truth of a proposition; when uttered from a position of authority (such as by Company officials or managers), they gain pragmatic weight as ideological normalisations.

For example, Marlow remarks: *"The conquest of the earth ... is just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale"* (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 10). This assertion appears at the very outset of the narrative and bluntly describes imperial conquest as theft and violence. However, because it is embedded within Marlow's retrospective narration to his fellow sailors, the illocution is both expositional and distanced. Conrad's narrator asserts the brutality, but the narrative framing avoids a direct authorial condemnation. Pragmatically, this creates a dual perlocution: readers are encouraged to recognise colonial violence but are also left with the impression that this violence is a historical or "given" reality, rather than an immediately contestable practice.

In contrast, Company officials employ mitigated assertives to downplay atrocities. When the manager describes Kurtz's methods as merely an "unsound method" (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 65), the speech act frames violence and exploitation as technical inefficiency rather than moral wrongdoing. This euphemistic assertion operates as a face-saving strategy, minimising culpability and preserving the Company's institutional legitimacy. Such pragmatic choices naturalise imperial conquest, making exploitation appear as routine administration rather than criminality.

Table 1

Examples of Authoritative Assertives in *Heart of Darkness*

Speaker	Excerpt from Text	Illocutionary Force	Pragmatic Effect
Marlow (narrator)	"The conquest of the earth … is just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale." (p. 10)	Assertive (evaluative)	Exposes colonial brutality, but narrative framing distances authorial stance, leaving the critique ambivalent.
Company Manager	"Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts… his method was unsound." (p. 65)	Assertive (judgmental/euphemistic)	Normalises exploitation by framing it as a technical flaw rather than a moral crime; protects institutional face.

Note. Examples are drawn from Conrad, J. (1902/1999). Heart of Darkness. Penguin Classics.

Directive and Commissive Acts that Enact Control

Another key pragmatic pattern in *Heart of Darkness* lies in the Company officials' and pilgrims' reliance on directive and commissive acts. Directives attempt to make others perform actions (orders, instructions, threats), while commissives commit the speaker to a future action (promises, pledges, threats framed as commitments). In a colonial setting, these illocutions become central to the performance of hierarchical control. For example, when the manager quietly suggests that Kurtz should be removed because his methods are "unsound," he implies an order without explicitly commanding it (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 65). The pragmatic force is indirect but unmistakable: he authorises elimination under the guise of managerial judgment. Such a directive relies on institutional authority rather than overt force; its perlocutionary effect is to normalise the removal of rivals as a matter of administrative routine.

Similarly, commissive acts appear in moments where officials pledge protection or support but, in practice, imply threats or coercion. The manager's talk of *"measures must be taken"* to prevent rivals from gaining an advantage functions both as a commitment and as a veiled threat. These commissives demonstrate the Company's pragmatic claim to impunity; its representatives promise to act decisively, not under law but under imperial prerogative. By embedding these orders and pledges within cautious, euphemistic phrasing, the discourse creates an implicature of inevitability: colonial agents imply that such directives are necessary, routine steps in maintaining order. Thus, directives and commissives do not merely organise action; they enact domination, presupposing authority over both subordinates and colonised populations.

Table 2
Examples of Directive and Commissive Acts in *Heart of Darkness*

Speaker	Excerpt from Text	Illocutionary Force	Pragmatic Effect
Company Manager	"Mr Kurtz's method was unsound… measures must be taken." (p. 65)	Directive (indirect order)	Suggests removal of Kurtz; authority expressed as managerial necessity, cloaking coercion.
Company Manager (aside)	"There is a touch of death about a ship's captain who cannot keep order." (p. 47)	Commissive (veiled threat/commitment)	Commits to disciplinary action; pragmatic effect is intimidation of subordinates.
Pilgrims (crew)	"We want no delay! Let's push on!" (p. 72)	Directive (explicit order/request)	Demands forward motion; illustrates coercive impatience of colonisers.

Note. Examples are drawn from Conrad, J. (1902/1999). Heart of Darkness. Penguin Classics.

Expressives and Performative Rhetoric: Kurtz's Eloquence as Ideological Work

Kurtz occupies a unique position in *Heart of Darkness* as both a charismatic figure and a symbol of colonial excess. His language is marked by expressive illocutions, utterances that reveal internal states, desires, passions, exclamations, but which also operate performatively to command admiration and allegiance. Pragmatically, Kurtz's eloquence functions as a rhetorical weapon, simultaneously seducing listeners and legitimising imperial appropriation. One striking moment occurs when Kurtz asserts: *"My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my "* (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 76). The repetition of "my" transforms the utterance into an expression of possession and passion, but pragmatically it also enacts a performative claim of ownership over people, objects, and landscapes. The illocution here is not only expressive but declarative: it presupposes colonial entitlement and invites the audience to accept it as self-evident.

Kurtz's written report for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" exemplifies the same pattern. Its lofty rhetoric and humanitarian tone are expressive of a civilising zeal, yet its infamous postscript *"Exterminate all the brutes!"* (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 83) reverses the apparent illocution, collapsing humanitarian discourse into a genocidal directive. Pragmatically, this creates a disturbing implicature: eloquence and idealism are revealed as masks for brutality. Kurtz's eloquence thus dramatises the performative nature of colonial discourse: words both veil and enact violence. Expressive utterances carry perlocutionary effects that extend beyond emotion—they command loyalty, silence dissent, and transform atrocity into destiny.

Table 3
Examples of Expressive Illocutions in Kurtz's Rhetoric

Speaker	Excerpt from Text	Illocutionary Force	Pragmatic Effect
Kurtz	"My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—" (p. 76)	Expressive / Declarative	Expresses passion but simultaneously enacts ownership, legitimising imperial possession.
Kurtz	"Exterminate all the brutes!" (p. 83)	Expressive (frustration/zeal) turned Directive	Shifts from humanitarian rhetoric to genocidal command; pragmatically

			exposes violence underlying colonial ideals.
Marlow (commenting on Kurtz)	"There was a touch of death about a voice that could hold men." (p. 78)	Expressive (evaluation)	Highlights Kurtz's rhetorical charisma; the implicature is that eloquence itself functions as power.

Note. Examples are drawn from Conrad, J. (1902/1999). Heart of Darkness. Penguin Classics.

Reported Speech, Omission, and the Silencing Implicature

One of the most pervasive pragmatic strategies in *Heart of Darkness* is the treatment of African voices through reported speech, omission, and elision. Instead of being given full propositional utterances, Africans are frequently represented by fragmentary cries, indistinct noises, or Marlow's mediated descriptions. Pragmatically, this choice produces a silencing implicature: because African speech is rarely direct or dialogic, the reader is invited to infer a lack of linguistic agency and subjectivity.

For example, Marlow repeatedly describes Africans as producing only "a wild and passionate uproar," "a burst of yells," or "a chorus of cries" (Conrad, 1902/1999, pp. 37–38). These are not full speech acts but soundscapes rendered without propositional content. The illocutionary force of these representations is not attributed to African subjects themselves but instead filtered through the narrator's framing. The perlocutionary effect is to marginalise African voices while elevating the European narrator's interpretive authority.

Similarly, when Marlow notes that "they howled and leapt and spun, and made horrid faces" (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 39), the representation collapses speech and ritual into physicality, reinforcing stereotypes of primitivism. The omission of propositional dialogue contributes to the structural implicature that Africans are objects of observation rather than interlocutors in discourse. In contrast, Europeans, even when corrupt, inefficient, or violent, are given elaborate direct speech and complex reported dialogue. This asymmetry in pragmatic representation is not accidental; it reflects a colonial discourse strategy in which authority resides in the European voice, while the colonised are positioned as silent, noisy, or unintelligible.

Table 4

Examples of Reported Speech and Silencing in *Heart of Darkness*

Group Represented	Excerpt from Text	Illocutionary Force	Pragmatic Effect
Africans (general)	"A burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping…" (pp. 37–38)	Reported sound (no propositional content)	Collapses speech into noise; pragmatic implicature of voicelessness and lack of agency.
Africans (ritual scene)	"They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces." (p. 39)	Expressive (narrator's report)	Reduces linguistic potential to bodily spectacle; denies discursive subjectivity.
Europeans (Manager & Pilgrims)	"Unsound method… measures must be taken." (p. 65)	Assertive / Directive (full propositional speech)	Given a direct, authoritative voice; the pragmatic effect is to foreground European agency and authority.

Note. Examples are drawn from Conrad, J. (1902/1999). Heart of Darkness. Penguin Classics.

Flouting Maxims and Ironic Implicatures: Narrator's Ambivalence

Marlow's narration is characterised by frequent flouting of Gricean maxims (quality, quantity, relation, and manner), which generates complex implicatures and sustains the novella's famous ambiguity. Instead of straightforwardly condemning or endorsing imperialism, Marlow speaks in ways that undercut his own statements with irony, rhetorical questions, and half-formed thoughts. Pragmatically, this invites readers to perform interpretive work, producing oscillations between critique and complicity.

For instance, Marlow observes: *"There is a touch of death about a ship's captain who cannot keep order."* (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 47). The maxim of quantity is flouted here—Marlow gives more evaluative and metaphorical commentary than necessary. The implicature is ironic: while ostensibly about discipline, the remark suggests the futility of control in a collapsing imperial environment. Elsewhere, Marlow famously remarks on imperialism: *"There is a fascination about the abomination."* (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 19). Here, the maxim of quality (truthfulness) is flouted through paradox: how can abomination also fascinate? The implicature is dual: imperial violence is simultaneously condemned as horrific and acknowledged as seductively powerful. Such contradictory implicatures embody the ambivalence that has fuelled polarised readings of the novella.

Even in describing Kurtz, Marlow uses maxim flouting to keep meaning suspended: *"There is a touch of death about a voice that could hold men."* (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 78). The violation of the maxim of manner (clarity) creates irony Marlow's phrasing leaves the reader uncertain whether Kurtz's rhetorical power is admirable, terrifying, or both. Through these strategies, Conrad ensures that no single interpretation is definitively authorised. Pragmatically, this indeterminacy protects the text from stable ideological classification, allowing it to appear both critical of empire and complicit in its discourses.

Table 5

Examples of Maxim Flouting and Ironic Implicatures in *Heart of Darkness*

Passage	Maxim Flouted	Implicature Generated	Pragmatic Effect
"There is a fascination about the abomination." (p. 19)	Quality (truthfulness)	Imperial horror is also seductive.	Produces tension between condemnation and attraction.
"There is a touch of death about a ship's captain who cannot keep order." (p. 47)	Quantity (over-elaboration)	Discipline and survival are linked; irony undercuts imperial authority.	Reveals the fragility of colonial control.
"There is a touch of death about a voice that could hold men." (p. 78)	Manner (ambiguity)	Kurtz's eloquence is powerful but dangerous.	Keeps readers suspended between admiration and dread.

Note. Examples are drawn from Conrad, J. (1902/1999). Heart of Darkness. Penguin Classics.

Politeness, Facework, and the Illocutionary Climax of "The Horror!"

Company officials in *Heart of Darkness* consistently employ politeness strategies and face-saving devices that mitigate the brutality of their actions. Their language is shaped by bureaucratic euphemism, which couches acts of exploitation in terms of "administrative necessity" or "unsound method." For example, when the manager describes Kurtz's excesses as an "unsound method" (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 65), the utterance functions as a face-saving assertive: it acknowledges a problem while stripping it of moral weight. Pragmatically, this produces the implicature that violence and exploitation are regrettable but inevitable

consequences of colonial enterprise. The effect is to protect institutional legitimacy while deflecting responsibility. By masking atrocities in managerial language, Company speech enacts a linguistic deferral of culpability and sustains the illusion of order.

In stark contrast to this bureaucratic mitigation, Kurtz's last words, *"The horror! The horror!"* (Conrad, 1902/1999, p. 91), constitute an expressive illocutionary climax. The utterance is compressed, exclamatory, and profoundly ambiguous. Pragmatically, it functions as an illocutionary act whose perlocutionary effects vary according to interpretation: some readers take it as genuine moral revelation, others as aesthetic awe at the abyss of experience, and still others as Kurtz's recognition of his own complicity in atrocity. The flouting of quantity (minimal words for maximal effect) and manner (elliptical ambiguity) generates multiple implicatures. By refusing explicit elaboration, the text forces readers to supply meaning, thereby sustaining the novella's enduring interpretive tension. Together, these two pragmatic modes of euphemistic facework by the Company and Kurtz's ambiguous expressive exclamation form a continuum of colonial discourse. On one end, officials neutralise atrocity through polite managerial language; on the other, Kurtz condenses colonial experience into a cry that destabilises meaning. Both strategies show how language is deployed not only to describe empire but to perform its power, its evasions, and its crises of conscience.

Interpretation Pragmatics and the Performance of Colonial Discourse

When considered collectively, *Heart of Darkness's* pragmatic operations show how colonial discourse is not just described but also performed. Commissives, directives, euphemistic facework, and authoritative assertives are used by company officials to normalise exploitation and avoid responsibility. Kurtz's eloquence serves as both a destructive command and a seductive ideology, embodying the performative rhetoric of empire. In contrast, Marlow uses irony, maxim-flouting, and implicature to narrate, creating a voice that is both critical and complicit, an ambivalence that has fueled debate for generations. Most importantly, colonised voices are reduced to noise or spectacle due to the structural silencing implicature caused by the near-complete lack of African speech acts. This disparity guarantees that Europeans linguistically control authority while Africans are practically shut out of the conversation. The overall effect is a story in which colonial power is kept alive not only by physical control but also by how people talk about things, how they euphemise things, and how they leave things unsaid. Conrad's novella embodies the discursive logic of empire through speech acts, implicatures, politeness strategies, and silences. It demonstrates that colonial authority is not solely enforced through violence but is expressed through linguistic practices that normalise, obscure, and occasionally undermine imperial power.

Table 6

Politeness/Facework and Illocutionary Climax in *Heart of Darkness*

Speaker / Context	Excerpt from Text	Illocutionary Force	Pragmatic Effect
Company Manager	"Mr. Kurtz's method was unsound." (p. 65)	Assertive (euphemistic judgment)	Uses bureaucratic politeness to mitigate brutality; deflects moral responsibility and preserves institutional legitimacy.
Company Officials	References to "administrative difficulties" and "trade interests" (various passages)	Assertive (face-saving)	Frames violence as collateral to commerce; implicature that exploitation is regrettable but inevitable.

| Kurtz (dying words) | "The horror! The horror!" (p. 91) | Expressive (exclamatory climax) | Ambiguous recognition—could imply guilt, awe, or terror. Elliptical form forces readers to infer meaning, sustaining interpretive tension. |

Note. Examples are drawn from Conrad, J. (1902/1999). Heart of Darkness. Penguin Classics.

Findings

The pragmatic analysis of *Heart of Darkness* shows that Conrad's novella enacts colonial discourse through a complex interplay of speech acts and implicatures that both expose and obscure imperial violence. Company officials frequently use authoritative assertives to normalise conquest, employing bureaucratic or euphemistic terms to frame exploitation as routine administration. In contrast, Marlow's evaluative assertives describe imperialism as "*robbery with violence*," yet the narrative framing softens these judgments and produces ambivalent perlocutionary effects. Directives and commissives issued by managers and pilgrims, such as commands, threats, and promises, mark the hierarchical authority of the Company and suggest a coercive entitlement to act outside moral accountability. At the same time, Kurtz's rhetoric functions as expressive speech acts that seduce and dominate, moving between humanitarian claims and brutal declarations such as "Exterminate all the brutes." His eloquence illustrates the performative power of language to legitimise possession and violence in imperial contexts.

No less significant are pragmatic silencing and implicature mechanisms that embed asymmetries of power. Africans are basically spoken of in terms of noises or gestures instead of complete propositional utterance, building a structural implicature of voicelessness and disavowing discursive agency while awarding authority to European narration. The speech of Marlow frequently violates Gricean maxims, creating ironic implicatures that maintain interpretive uncertainty. Phrases like "the fascination of the abomination" both criticise and romanticise the empire, such that the text evades a fixed interpretation. Politeness strategies and facework enable Company officials to deflect blame by reporting atrocities as "administrative difficulties" or "*unsound methods,*" which maintains institutional face while normalising violence as necessary. The novella's practical climax comes in the last cry of Kurtz, "The horror," an evocative illocution that compels readers to make several different meanings, such as moral acknowledgement, existential despair, or acknowledgement of guilt. Cumulatively, these observations confirm that colonial domination in the novella is sustained not just by physical violence but by the verbal means of speech acts, implicature, and rhetorical ambiguity.

Conclusion

This research determines that *Heart of Darkness* performs colonial discourse in its pragmatic structure as well as in narrative content. The study illustrates how assertives, directives, commissives, and expressives are used strategically to naturalise imperial power, and implicatures that result from maxim flouting, omission, and euphemistic politeness function to cover up responsibility and silence colonised voices. Kurtz's eloquence, Marlow's ambivalence, and bureaucratic discourse of the Company cumulatively show how colonial ideology works at the level of communication.

Practically, the novella demonstrates that the empire is not merely imposed by physical conquest but also enacted through discourse that constitutes violence as order, represses other voices, and disguises atrocities in rhetoric and obscurity. This discovery marries postcolonial critique to linguistic pragmatics and demonstrates how the colonial project is reproduced through ordinary speech acts and their entailed meanings. In highlighting these linguistic processes, the research contributes to both postcolonial studies and literary pragmatics,

providing a replicable model through which to examine how language exercises power in other postcolonial and colonial texts.

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