What triggers perceptions of racism in *Heart of Darkness*?

A reader-response analysis

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Abstract

This paper combines reader-response analysis and stylistic insights to investigate what may be triggering perceptions of racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It presents the results of a survey that asked participants to read extracts from the novel in which Africans are described and to highlight words and phrases they found problematic. Participants were then asked to answer some questions about their perception. Linking quantitative examination of the patterns emerging from participants' highlighting with a qualitative analysis of participants' answers, this paper provides a comprehensive picture of the linguistic features and structures that contribute to the perception of racism in *Heart of Darkness*. By doing so, this paper not only offers a novel perspective on the discussion about race and racism in Conrad's canonical text, but it also provides further empirical evidence of the relationship between language and reader response.

1. Introduction

There is growing empirical evidence in stylistics (e.g. Bell et al. 2019, Fernandez-Quintanilla 2020, Grisot et al. 2020, Bell et al. 2021) of the relationship between language and reader response. Specific linguistic features can have a concrete effect on how readers engage with and respond to a text. In the context of literary studies, examining the relationship between linguistic features and reader response not only can help assess whether an established critical reading of a text is "supported by evidence from real readers" (Peplow & Carter 2014: 440), but can also assist in the identification of the specific textual elements that may be priming such a reading. This paper adopts this dual approach to study

the perception of racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As the next section will show in more detail, race and racism are recurrent preoccupations in literary and critical discussions of *Heart of Darkness*, and many critical readings of the last forty years have recognised at least some racist undertones in the way the Africans are represented in the novel. However, there is almost no account of how readers react to these aspects of the text, and what they react to, linguistically speaking. This paper fills this gap by, on the one hand, using reader responses to an online questionnaire to test whether the racist implications discussed by the literature is supported by evidence from real readers; on the other, by identifying and investigating the actual linguistic features readers are reacting to when engaging with potentially racist depictions of Africans in the novel. By doing so, this paper sheds new light on how such a fundamental aspect of this canonical and widely read literary text is perceived by readers, offering a novel approach to a discussion that has remained for the most part the remit of literary critics. More generally, this paper contributes to the discussion of the relationship between textual features and reader response in stylistics, providing further empirical data that evidences such a link.

2. Approaches to race and racism in *Heart of Darkness*

As Goldberg (1994) maintains, racism is not a singular phenomenon, but rather a plural and multifaceted one. This plurality has given rise to a plethora of different theories and understandings of racism, which has been variously defined as a form of prejudice, an ideology, and as practices and actions (Wieviorka 1995). As the phenomenon itself and its manifestations change across time and contexts, so has its definition. It is no surprise that "[t]he definition of racism has been hotly contested both within and between disciplines" (Durrheim 2020: 431), as different conceptualisations can include some aspects of the phenomenon but exclude others (Durrheim 2020: 432). Although we align with Durrheim (2020) in seeing racism as a historical fact, an ongoing reality, and at the same time a social construction, participating in the debate on the definition(s) of racism is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, what this paper focuses on is on the discursive representation of racism, and its perception. As Wodak & Reisigl (2005: 372) explain, "racism, as both social practice and ideology, manifests itself discursively. […] Racist opinions and beliefs are produced and reproduced by means of discourse; discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated, and legitimated through discourse." Studying discursive representations of racism and their perception can provide crucial insights not only on how such discourses are created and instantiated, but also on "the different modes and dimensions of the reproduction of racism in society" (van Dijk 1995: 4).

Whitehead (2018) identifies five main types of empirical data on which discursive research on racism has been based: "elite" discourse (e.g. media, educational and academic texts, political texts and talks, corporate discourse), individual interviews, focus groups and groups discussions, naturally occurring talk-in-interactions, and online texts and interactions. This classification highlights the lack of research on discursive representations of racism in literature. Given the focus of discursive approaches more generally on "actual instances of language use, in contrast to the use of invented or hypothetical examples" (Whitehead 2018: 327), the dearth of attention on fiction as a source of empirical data for discourse research on racism is unsurprising. However, we argue that literature, especially canonical literature, has the same potential as elite discourse to "strongly influence public discourse and opinion" (van Dijk 1993: 284), given its central place in hegemonic culture. Literature is a communicative event and, as such, participates in the creation and reproduction of discourse. The analysis of canonical literature can be as useful in understanding how dominant discursive practices are construed and shared, alongside the study of other types of elite texts, such as those produced by the mass media, politics, education, scholarships, or business corporations.

Heart of Darkness is a prime example of canonical literature, having traditionally had an enduring place in the Anglophone literary "great tradition" (Leavis [1948] 1973). From this vantage point, *Heart of Darkness* has contributed to shape and share discourses of race and racism, especially from the 1970s onwards. In fact, the question of race and racism in *Heart of Darkness* took centre stage in Conradian studies following Chinua Achebe's 1975 lecture "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", later published and amended in several outlets, for instance in Achebe (2016). In his lecture, Achebe (2016: 21) accuses Conrad of being a "thoroughgoing racist" and argues that *Heart of Darkness* is a novel which "celebrates dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race". He argues that *Heart of Darkness* conforms to imperialistic ideologies, representing Africa as a "place of negations" against which European "spiritual grace" (Achebe 2016: 15) can manifest, and Africans as wild and unbound, so different from Europeans that they almost seem inhuman. Several literary critics (e.g. Zins 1982, Watts 1983, Watts 1990, Said 1993, Hawkins 2006, Miller 2006, Lawtoo 2012) have contributed to this discussion, supporting and challenging Achebe's (2016) views to different extents. The debate has generated interest among the general public too, with many newspapers dedicating columns to the topic, including *The Guardian* (Phillips 2003, Jones 2007, Trueman 2018), *The New Yorker* (Denby 1995), *The New York Times* (Thiong'o 2017), and *The Irish Times* (Gordon 2021). Even though the critical interest in questions of race and racism only emerged in the last 35 years, these questions take today centre stage in any reading – academic or otherwise – of Conrad's novel and, as Allington (2006: 133) observes, readers are

"obliged [...] to take a stand on a matter of controversy that, in the Sixties, simply did not exist – namely, whether or not it is a racist book."

The identification of racism in *Heart of Darkness* has primarily revolved around how African people are represented and referred to in the novel. According to Achebe (2016: 16), the passages about Africans are the "most interesting and revealing" of Conrad's racist attitude. Achebe (2016: 21) argues that *Heart of Darkness* dehumanises Africans, a tendency that has also been identified by Hawkins (2006) and Lawtoo (2012). The use of the slur *nigger* has been similarly recognised as contributing to the derogatory depiction of Africans. Achebe (2016: 22) straightforwardly criticises Conrad for having had an "inordinate love of that word" that signals the fact he "had a problem with niggers". Other scholars (Watts 1990, Zins 1982, Hawkins 2006, Simmons 2015) are instead more ambivalent about the implications of the term. On the one hand, they recognise the offensive and disparaging role the word plays in the novel; on the other, they consider the influence that the wider historical and socio-cultural context in which *Heart of Darkness* was written might have had on the language used by Conrad. Regardless of the side taken, the representation of Africans has been a major point of discussion, given its direct links with the wider question of race and racism in Conrad's work. However, despite its centrality in the interpretation and reception of *Heart of Darkness*, the representation of Africans has been rarely approached from a stylistic point of view, and very little attention has been paid to the actual language used to build the textual depiction of the African people (but see Mastropierro 2017, discussed below). This is an important avenue of research, as the linguistic choices made to portray the Africans are likely to impact how readers interpret the question of race and racism in the text. There is extensive research (especially in the area of critical discourse analysis, e.g. Fairclough 2010) indicating that the textual representation of a given entity informs and constructs the discourses around that entity, which in turn can shape our perception of and attitudes towards the entity in the real world. Particularly relevant is the research that focuses on the representation of discriminated groups, like the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*: studies like Baker et al. (2008) and Taylor (2014) on migrants, Moore et al. (2008) and Baker et al. (2013) on Muslims, McEnery and Baker (2017) on homosexual men, or Wilkinson (2022) on queer people, to name just a few, show that the linguistic features and structures used to textually represent individuals are, at the same time, instantiations and corroboration of the negative discourses that contribute to the prejudice towards these groups.

One of the few linguistic studies of the textual representation of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* is Mastropierro (2017), which offers a corpus-stylistic analysis of recurrent patterns in the fictional representation of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Mastropierro (2017) shows that some of the most prominent words used to identify the Africans (*nigger(s)*, *black(s)*, *savage(s)*, *native(s)*, and *negro*)

occur repeatedly with words from the same semantic fields, creating a negative semantic prosody (an attitudinal tendency in the use of a lexical item that can reveal evaluative stances towards the topic of the discourse, see Sinclair 2004). Mastropierro (2017: 151) suggests that it is these semantic fields – labelled "Physicality" (including words like *feet*, *body*, *shoulder*), "Collectives" (e.g. *crowd*, *band*, *strings*), "Incomprehensibility" (e.g. *moaned*, *howling*, *groaned*), and "General negativity" (e.g. *sorrow*, *unhappy*, *fool*) – that makes the representation of Africans dehumanising and potentially racist. However, this suggestion was not tested, as Mastropierro's (2017) corpus study focuses on the textual aspects of the depiction, and not on its potential effects on the reader. Building on Mastropierro's (2017) findings, and Mastropierro and Conklin (2021) carry out a reader-response analysis to test whether readers of *Heart of Darkness* perceive the representation of Africans as racist, discriminatory, and dehumanising. In particular, they investigated the influence of the slurs *nigger* and *negro* on the perception of racism in the text. Their findings show that readers do perceive the description of the Africans as racist, but not because of the presence of the slurs: "[the slurs] play a secondary role in triggering a racist reading, subordinated to other textual factors that readers seem to respond to independently of whether they are accompanied by the occurrence of slurs or not" (Mastropierro 2017; Mastropierro & Conklin 2021: 37). This raises the question: if it is not only the slurs, what other textual factors are contributing to the perception of racism? The current paper aims to answer exactly this question. As we will explain in detail in the following section, participants in our survey were asked to read extracts about the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* and highlight what they found problematic; they were then asked to answer some questions about what they highlighted. Combining the analysis of the highlighting to that of the participants' answers, we provide a comprehensive picture of what motivates their perception of racism in *Heart of Darkness*. By doing so, we are making two major contributions to the study of racism in *Heart of Darkness*. First, we contribute with empirical data to the question of racism in this canonical text, aiming to complement the literary perspectives that have dominated the discussion in the existing literature. Second, we further the understanding of the relationship between textual features and reader response, providing empirical evidence to support this relationship.

3. Method and data

Approaches to reader response data and analysis are usually classified in two paradigms: experimental and naturalistic (see Swann & Allington 2009). Studies within the experimental paradigm aim to elicit pre-specified aspects of and reactions to the reading experience, by maximising control over the

experiment setting so that the data retrieved is as relevant as possible to the research questions. In contrast, studies within the naturalistic paradigm focus on contextualised and holistic reading practices, prioritising the ecological validity of the reading setting and minimising as far as possible researcher intervention. As Bell et al. (2019) explain, neither paradigm is necessarily better than the other, as both have advantages and disadvantages, and the choice between one or the other depends on the goals of each individual study. The present paper aims to (i) test whether readers perceive racism in the representations of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, and (ii) identify the linguistic features readers may be responding to. Given our focus on specific parts of *Heart of Darkness* and on specific linguistic features within these parts, we adopt an experimental approach, so that we can retrieve data relevant to these aims. Readers' response to racism can also be studied using a naturalistic approach, as Benwell (2009) and Proctor & Benwell (2015) show, but our interest in responses to pre-specified aspects of the text makes an experimental design – with its higher degree of control over the retrieval process – better suited to our aims. Similar experimental approaches have been shown to be successful in illuminating readers' responses to specific linguistic and stylistic features, as demonstrated in the reader-response analysis of features such as iconicity (Auracher et al. 2011), metaphor (Gibbs & Blackwell 2012), foregrounding (Emmott et al. 2006, Zyngier et al. 2007), narrative point of view (Cui 2017, Sotirova 2006), and speech and thought presentation (Grisot et al. 2020), to name just a few.

The data was elicited through a survey comprising two parts. In the first part, participants were presented with ten extracts from *Heart of Darkness*. These extracts (217 words long on average, ranging from 46 to 415 words) were chosen because all of them describe or refer to Africans. Participants were informed that the extracts were narrated by Marlow, the main narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, and that all of them describe his encounters with the Africans he meets while travelling from one outpost station to the next in Congo, at a time when the country was under Belgian colonial control. It is important to mention here that the issue of focalisation and the relationship between author and narrator have been key points of discussion in the debate on the potential racist implications of *Heart of Darkness*. For instance, whereas Achebe (2016: 20) claims that Marlow "enjoys Conrad's complete confidence", as the author fails to offer an alternative frame of reference with which readers could have interpreted the actions and opinions of his narrator, Zins (1982: 75-76) maintains that "Marlow […] is not the author's mouthpiece, but a distinct character in himself, whose point of view is markedly different from Conrad's perspective." Watts (1990) is less categorical than other critics on the matter. On the one hand, he recognises that the speaker in the story is Marlow the character, and not Conrad the author. On the other, he acknowledges that the double narrative frame of *Heart of Darkness* – in which Marlow is a hypodiegetic narrator, whose

words are reported by another, unnamed intradiegetic narrator – "tends to generate ambiguities" (Watts 1990: xxii). While we recognise the significance of this discussion in the critical study of *Heart of Darkness*, we believe that attempting to disambiguate participants' perceptions of the narrator's point of view from the author's would have distracted from the goals of our study. This paper aims to assess whether participants perceive the representation of Africans in the extracts – rather than Marlow's or Conrad's point of view – as racist or not. In the end, whether participants believe that the potential racist implications in the extracts stem from Marlow or Conrad would not change the fact that they perceive the racist implications in the first place, which is what we are interested in. Therefore, in our questionnaire we simply mentioned that the extracts were narrated by Marlow.
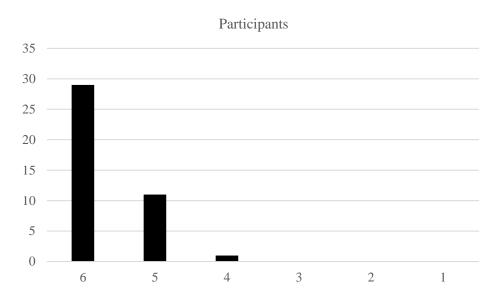
For each extract, participants were asked to "highlight what they considered problematic in the way African people are described, talked about, or represented". Participants were encouraged to be specific in their highlighting, i.e. instead of highlighting a whole sentence that contained something that they considered problematic, they were asked to highlight the individual words that made them think that the sentence was problematic. It is worth pointing out that racism was not mentioned in the questionnaire introduction or instructions, so participants read the extracts without any prompt in this sense. After each extract, participants could comment on what they highlighted in the passage. The second part of the survey presented participants with 11 questions. The first five were about the passages, while the following six gathered information about the participants themselves. Question 1 (Q1), "How would you describe the representation of the Africans in the extracts?", was designed to elicit answers regarding the overall fictional representation of the Africans. Question 2 (Q2), "Is there any repeated language, phrases, or words that feature in the representation of the African people?", was designed to get participants thinking about specific language features that they consciously recognised as being reiterated in the representation of the Africans. Question 3 (Q3), "Are there any other patterns (e.g. consistent motifs or elements, shared features) in the representations of the Africans?", aimed to elicit answers about thematic patterns the participants recognised, even if they were not aware of the linguistic features that conveyed them. Only at this point, in Question 4 (Q4), was racism mentioned for the first time: Q4 was a Likert scale question that asked participants the extent to which they agreed with the statement "The representation of the African people in these passages is racist". A Likert scale question was preferred to an open question in this case because the former produces data that is directly comparable across participants and can therefore be analysed quantitatively. Answers to this type of question would provide us with a solid quantitative base to build on. Even though an open question that asked participants whether they perceived racism in the extracts could have elicited more personal responses, agreement or lack thereof with our statement

can similarly be seen as a sound indication of the participants' perception of racism in the extracts. Question 5 (Q5) was optional and asked "Any comments on the statement and questions above, or anything related you would like to add?". Finally, Questions 6 to 11 asked for participants' age, gender, ethnicity, first language, and whether they had read or studied *Heart of Darkness* before.

Seventy participants took part into the survey. Incomplete responses were excluded, as were those from participants whose first language was not English, leaving 41 responses for analysis. Our participants were students enrolled on undergraduate programmes in the University of Nottingham's School of English, aged between 18 and 21 (but one participant was 25); thirty-two were female, five were male, and four were non-binary or preferred not to provide their gender. For the participants that indicated their ethnicity, 64% were white and 36% were of other or mixed ethnicities. Given the topic of the extracts, and aim of the study overall, we decided to check whether the two groups had different perceptions of racism (i.e., different ratings for Q4): the mean score for the white group was 5.82 (range = 5-6); the mean score for the other group was 5.46 (range 4-6). Because the ratings were very similar, and if anything the group of white participants had stronger levels of agreement with the statement, we analysed the data for all participants together.

4. Results

To start with, we tested whether and to what extent participants perceived the representation of Africans as racist. The ratings for Q4, which asked participants to provide ratings for the statement "The representation of the African people in these passages is racist", are presented in Figure 1. Almost all participants (40, 97.6%) answered with a score between 5 and 6, where 6 indicates "strongly agree" and 1 indicates "strongly disagree"; the average score is 5.68. We can therefore assume that, in line with our previous studies (Mastropierro 2017; Mastropierro & Conklin 2019, 2021), participants agree that the way Africans are textually constructed in these extracts is racist. The next step was to establish what motivates this agreement. We evaluated this by combining quantitative and qualitative insights. In the next section, we present an analysis of the most highlighted words in the extracts, while in Section 4.2 we examine the answers to the open questions, relating them to the highlighting.

Figure 1. Scores to Q4 about perception of racism

4.1 Analysis of the most highlighted words

Having established that participants perceive the representation of Africans as racist, we turned to examine which words specifically were considered problematic. We focused on individual words because the tool we used to create the highlighting task, Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com), counted the words highlighted by each participant individually; we could, therefore, compare frequency of highlighting across participants and sum up how many times and by how many participants each word was highlighted. Of course, meaning is also conveyed by words in context, so in the following analysis we also took into account when highlighted words occurred together. Of the 887 words that comprise the extracts, 612 (69%) were highlighted at least once by at least one participant. On average, individual participants highlighted 140 words each (15,8% of the total), with a range of highlighting spanning between 22 (2,5%) and 536 (60,4%) words. To maximise the relevance of our results, we narrowed down the analysis to words that were both (i) highlighted by at least half of the population (21 participants) and (ii) highlighted at least 50% of times they occurred. These selection criteria produced 36 words (4.06%), shown in Table 1. The words in Table 1 are sorted by "% highlighted", which indicates the percentage of highlighting in relation to total number of times they could have been highlighted if all participants highlighted them in all the extracts they occur in.

Table 1. Words highlighted by at least half the participants and highlighted at least 50% of times they occur*

Word	Freq	PoS	Participants	% highlighted	Word	Freq	PoS	Participants	% highlighted
grotesque	1	JJ	41	100	*beginnings*	1	NN2	25	61

nigger	2	NN1	41	99	*dilated*	1	JJ	25	61
savages	1	NN2	39	95	*howled*	1	VVD	25	61
monster	1	NN1	36	88	*barbarous*	1	JJ	24	59
satanic	1	JJ	36	88	*belonged*	1	VVN	24	59
creatures	1	NN2	35	85	*brute*	1	NN1	24	59
fiendlike	1	JJ	35	85	*litany*	1	NN1	24	59
savage	1	JJ	35	85	*bones*	1	NN2	23	56
human	1	JJ	33	80	*eyed*	1	JJ	23	56
blacks	1	NN2	31	76	*starvation*	1	NN1	23	56
monstrous	1	JJ	30	73	*shapes*	3	NN2	34	54
prehistoric	1	JJ	30	73	*witch*	2	NN1	30	54
violently	1	RR	30	73	*figures*	1	NN2	22	54
disease	1	NN1	29	71	*sharp*	1	JJ	22	54
horrid	1	JJ	29	71	*sorcerer*	1	NN1	22	54
masks	1	NN2	29	71	*blackness*	1	NN1	21	51
conquered	1	JJ	26	63	*figure*	1	NN1	21	51
language	1	NN1	26	63	*shadows*	2	NN2	36	50

* Freq: frequency of the word in all the extracts; PoS: part of speech; Participants: number of participants who highlighted the word at least once; % highlighted: % of highlighting in relation to word occurrence in all questionnaires; JJ: adjective; NN1: singular noun; NN2: plural noun; RR: adverb; VVD: past tense of lexical verb; VVN: past participle of lexical verb.

Many of these words have arguably negative connotations (e.g. *grotesque*, *nigger*, *monster*, *violently*, *horrid*, *brute*, *starvation*), but some others are not inherently derogatory, such as *shapes*, *human*, *language*, *beginnings*, *bones*, *sharp*, or *figure*. This is an indication that perceptions of racism are not triggered by the use of negative words only, but also by how words are used together in specific contexts. For instance, words like *shapes* and *figures*, which do not carry a negative connotation, are recognised as problematic by the vast majority of participants when used to refer to African people in negative contexts. For instance, *shapes* co-occurs with *moribund* to refer to the thinness and emaciation of the Africans in Example (1), while in Example (2) *figures* co-occurs with *black* and *listlessly* to convey the picture of aimless Africans. In Example (3), *human* and *language* occur together in a reference to the inability of the narrator to recognise the sounds uttered by the Africans as human language.

(1) These moribund *shapes* were free as air – and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees.

(2) Black *figures* strolled about listlessly, pouring water on the glow, whence proceeded a sound of hissing;

(3) they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of *human language*;

Further confirmation that participants considered context, in addition to individual word meaning, comes from words like *black* and *it*. These two items are highlighted by the majority of participants, but only a small number of their occurrences were highlighted, indicating that participants distinguished derogatory from non-derogatory instances based on context of use. *Black* occurs 17 times in the extracts; it is recognised as a problematic item by 34 participants (83% of the population), but it is highlighted only 34% of the times it occurs. Generally speaking, *black* does not have an inherently derogatory meaning. It is commonly used when referring to a person with black or dark brown skin. However, in *Heart of Darkness*, *black* is often employed to describe the skin tone of Africans' body parts, with an insistence that Achebe (2016: 22) defines a "fixation on blackness", as can be seen in Example (4). *Black* in *Heart of Darkness* is also used as an adjective premodifying a noun referring to the Africans. The co-occurrence of these nouns and *black* does not convey a positive connotation; quite the opposite, as with *black figures*, *black bones*, *or black shadows* in Example (5). Not all 17 occurrences of *black* are used in these ways, though. Some instances are employed to indicate the colour of objects (e.g. *black feathers*, *black rags*) or to simply refer to the Africans, as *black men* in Example (6). As it can be seen in Table 2, which lists all uses of *black* and *it*, and how many times they were highlighted, only a minority of participants highlighted cases like the latter in Example (6), while a larger proportion of the population highlighted cases like those seen in Examples (4) and (5).

(4) A *black* figure stood up, strode on long *black* legs, waving long *black* arms, across the glow. *It* had horns – antelope horns, I think – on its head.

(5) They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but *black* shadows of disease and starvation […].

(6) Six *black* men advanced in a file, toiling up the path.

Table 2. Occurrences of *black* and *it*

Occurrence of *black*	Times highlighted	Occurrence of *it*	Times highlighted
black limbs	24	it had horns	27
black shadows	24	it looked fiendlike enough	15
black bones	23	with them it's hard to tell	12
black shapes	20	connected with it	3
black arms	19	did he get it?	3
black legs	19	a meaning in it	2

black figure	18	*it looked startling*	2
black and incomprehensible frenzy	16	*it was ugly enough*	2
black figures	16	*as it were*	1
black neck	14	*as though it had been looking*	1
black fellow	10	*it was unearthly*	1
broad-chested black	6	*was the worst of it*	1
black feathers	5	*closed slowly on it*	0
black flat wall of the woods	5	*had it not occurred to me*	0
black men	4	*it didn't enter*	0
black rags	1	*it was clear*	0
black smoke	1	*it was cut short*	0
		it was paddled	0
		it was the same	0
		it would come slowly	0
		was it a badge	0

Table 2 shows a similar picture in relation to *it*. The pronoun *it* occurs 21 times in the extracts; it is recognised as problematic by 33 participants (81% of the population), but is highlighted only 8% of the times it occurs. Most of the times, *it* is used with its usual meaning of pronoun for a non-human referent; these cases were not highlighted. However, in a few specific cases, like in Example (4), *it* is employed as a pronoun for an African, and these marked occurrences were picked up by the participants, as the top entries of Table 2 show. Cases like *black* and *it* clearly suggest that a difference was perceived in the way some words were used and such a perception was an important factor to decide whether or not an item was employed in a problematic fashion.

When considering the parts of speech (PoS) of the words in Table 1, it can be noticed that the majority of these are nouns (NN tag, 20 out of 36, 55.55%) or adjectives (JJ tag, 13 out of 36, 36.11%). Most nouns are references to the Africans (*nigger*, *savages*, *monster*, *creatures*, *blacks*, *brute*, *shapes*, *witch*, *figures*, *sorcerer*, *figure*, and *shadows*) and most adjectives are employed in relation to the depiction or qualification of Africans (*grotesque*, *satanic*, *fiendlike*, *savage*, *black*, *human*, *monstrous*, *prehistoric*, *horrid*, *dilated*, *eyed*). Verbs are underrepresented, as only *howled* and *belonged* appear in Table 1 despite the extracts comprising more than 200 verbs, around 55 of which are used to depict Africans' actions. This suggests it is mainly the description of Africans that participants found problematic, rather than representations of what the Africans did.

A classification of the words in Table 1 into semantic categories shows more clearly the features of the Africans' representation that participants found most derogatory. We identified five categories, as can be seen in Table 3. Only content words were considered; when words occurred together in a multi-word unit, they are presented as connected by a + symbol. For example, *belonged*, *beginnings*, and *time* in Table 1 occur together in the multi-word unit *belonged to the beginnings of time*, presented in Table 2 as "*belonged + beginnings + time*". When a multi-word sequence includes words that do not appear in Table 1, these are presented in parenthesis, as for *horrid* (*faces*). There are some overlaps between categories, as the same words may have been used in ways that fit more

than one category. For instance, *sorcerer* can be seen as a general reference for an African, but also a lexical choice that emphasises the African's assumed exoticness.

Table 3. Words from Table 1 classified into semantic categories

Semantic category	Words
References	*nigger, savages, conquered + monster, (black) + shadows + disease + starvation, creatures, shapes, prehistoric + (man), blacks, witch + (man), brute, (black) + bones, (black) + figures, sorcerer, figure*
Physicality	*grotesque + masks, violently + dilated + (nostrils), (black) + bones, horrid (faces), sharp (teeth), (wild) + eyed*
Language	*satanic + litany, (no) + (sounds) + human + language, howled*
Exoticness	*fiendlike, savages, savage, witch + (man), belonged + beginnings + (time), (wild) + eyed, sorcerer*
General negatives	*monstrous, barbarous, blackness*

The largest group is "References", which encompasses nouns and noun phrases used to refer to the Africans. These range from clearly derogatory references (e.g. *nigger, brute, savages*) to terms that become derogatory when employed to describe human beings (e.g. *conquered monsters, black shadows of disease and starvation, black shapes*). The "Physicality" category comprises words related to the physical body of the Africans and its representation. Most of the words in this category refer to the faces of the African people (*grotesque masks, violently dilated nostrils, horrid faces, sharp teeth*), but also to the body overall (*black bones*). The "Language" group includes three items only (although seven words overall): *satanic litany, no sounds of human language,* and *howled*. These items represent the way in which the narrator describes the language used by the Africans. "Exoticness" groups words associated with an exotic imagery, through which the unfamiliarity of the Africans in the eyes of the narrator is emphasised. Finally, "General negatives" is an umbrella-category that collects the remaining words, which nevertheless share a negative meaning or connotation. It is interesting to notice some degree of overlap between the semantic categories identified here on the basis of participants' highlighting and those identified by Mastropierro (2017), based on corpus analysis (see Section 2). "Physicality", "Language", and "General negatives" fully mirror the "Physicality", "Incomprehensibility" and "General negatives" in Mastropierro (2017), while "References" and "Exoticness" include some words identified by Mastropierro (2017), although they are grouped in other categories. This overlap suggests that readers may be picking up the reiterated features identified with the corpus analysis, and that these repeated patterns play a role in triggering the perception of racism in the text.

Overall, the analysis of the quantitative data shows that the perception of racism in *Heart of Darkness* is not simply the result of the use of openly derogatory lexis in the extracts. Words like *nigger, brute, monster,* or *savages* are only a part of the picture, as the findings in Mastropierro (2017)

and Mastropierro and Conklin (2021) show. The other part is a complex fictional representation that builds on recurrent patterns and imagery, the derogatory nature of which is recognised on the basis of their specific use in the extracts. The highlighted words demonstrate recurring aspects of the depiction of the Africans: the focus on their physical bodies, the emphasis on exoticness and the incomprehensibility of their languages, their comparison to shapes, monsters, and shadows. Words related to these aspects were consistently picked up on, suggesting that these text-specific features may be contributing significantly to the perception of racism in the way African people are represented in *Heart of Darkness*. Of course, other non-linguistic factors may have equally had an impact on the reason why these words were consistently highlighted. Reading never occurs in a vacuum; rather, as Allington (2006: 139) remarks, "there is only reading in particular social contexts". The social context surrounding this particular instance of reading could have played a role as significant as that played by the extracts' linguistic features. Our participants, undergraduate students enrolled on an English degree in a UK institution, were probably familiar with – if not explicitly trained to recognise – this type of language, as colonial and postcolonial literature is often included in more and more "decolonised" English curricula. Even though only two out of 41 participants had read *Heart of Darkness* before, and only one had studied it, it is not unlikely that the recognition of the words in Table 1 as problematic has also been driven by participants' cultural awareness of racism in literature and practice in identifying potentially derogatory language in a text that, like *Heart of Darkness*, presents minorities in a situation of power imbalance. In fact, as we mentioned in Section 2, the extracts that our participants read and considered problematic were the very same that early, "pre-Achebe" critics read without any remarking upon issues of race and racism; hence, social context must be playing a part here. However, claiming that the text is irrelevant to reading would be an exaggeration, and acknowledging the role of social context in our results does not diminish their significance. The fundamental tenet of cognitive stylistics (Semino & Culpeper 2002) according to which texts project meaning while readers construct it underpins the idea that there is "a continual interaction between the text and the reader" (Wales 2011: 233), implying that readers' responses to a text cannot be completely separated from the linguistic level of such a text. It is likely that our participants' prior knowledge and the reading situation contributed to the perception of the linguistic features discussed in this section as problematic, but the consistency with which the words in Table 1 were highlighted is nevertheless significant, as it suggests that these words do play a major role in projecting this shared response, however context-dependant it may be.

In the next section, these findings will be compared to the picture emerging from the answers that participants gave to the open questions of the survey.

4.2 Analysis of participants' answers

In this section, answers to Q1, Q2, and Q3 will be analysed. The optional Q5 was answered only by six participants, so it will not be discussed. To provide an overall picture of the responses to the extracts, the main "aspects" of the Africans' representation that participants recognised in the extracts and mentioned were extracted and categorised. For instance, Example (7) shows the answer of a participant to Q1.

(7) African people are represented as animalistic in the extracts, and are also depicted as being bewildering or inhuman. Describes them to be living in suffering, seen as 'others' and outsiders by the narrator.

This answer recognises three aspects in the representation of the Africans: "Dehumanisation", that is, representing Africans as animals or machines, depriving them of human traits; "Otherness", representing Africans as "others", intrinsically different from what is familiar or generally accepted by the narrator; and "Negative", an umbrella category encompassing non-specific negative and derogatory representations, such as the reference to African people "living in suffering" in this case. Other aspects identified in the answers are: "Exoticness", the emphasis of assumed exotic, mysterious, and wild aspects of the Africans; "Physicality", the emphasis on the physical description and body of the Africans; "Collectiveness", relating to the description of the Africans as a homogeneous group, rather than discrete individuals; "Language", references to the language of the Africans being described as unintelligible; "Slurs", the use of racial slurs to refer to the Africans; "Blackness", descriptions of the Africans that emphasises the colour of their skin; and "*It*-pronoun", the use of the neuter pronoun *it* to refer to Africans. Finally, there is an aspect that differs from all others, "Point of view". "Point of view" does not refer to a specific theme in the representation of the Africans itself, but rather to the explicit recognition by the participants of the presence of a narratorial voice and focalisation that affects the representation (e.g., the reference to the narrator in Example (7) above). For instance, in the answer to Q1 showed in Example (8), in addition to the general "Negative" aspect, it is clear that the participant recognises the description of the Africans being affected by the ignorance of the narrator (referred to as "the author" in this example); hence, the "Point of view" tag. As we explained in Section 3, participating in the discussion of the potential overlaps between Marlow's and Conrad's point of view is beyond the scope of this paper: the "Point

of View" tag is mentioned here simply as a matter of comprehensiveness, as it is, together with the other tags, an aspect of the participants' perception of racism that we take into account.

(8) Fearfully but completely unaware. It reads as incredibly ignorant and offensive but the rhetoric lets the reader know that the author is looking at people he has very limited, if any, exposure to.

The result of this classification for Q1 to Q3 is shown in Table 4. The table presents both the raw frequency of how many times each aspect is mentioned per question, as well as the percentage in relation to the total number of mentions. The percentage is useful as the raw frequencies are not comparable across questions, given the uneven length of the answers. We noticed that participants provided the longest answers for Q1, while answers for Q2 and Q3 were shorter and shorter: the longer the answer, the increased the number of aspects of the Africans' representations mentioned by participants, hence the necessity of including percentages.

As explained in Section 3, Q1 was designed to elicit answers regarding the overall fictional representation of the Africans. A general negative depiction and dehumanisation are by far the most recognised aspects of the representation, followed by an emphasis on the Africans' assumed differences ("Exoticness" and "Otherness") and physical body. The frequent references to the narrator's point of view suggests that the participants were aware of the fact that the representation of the Africans was mediated by the perspective through which this depiction was presented to them, even if such focalisation may have not been apparent to the untrained eye.

Table 4. Representation of the Africans as described by participants

Q1: How would you describe the representation of the Africans in these extracts?	%	Raw freq	Q2: Is there any repeated language, phrases, or words that feature in the representation of the African people?	%	Raw freq	Q3: Are there any other patterns (e.g. consistent motifs or elements, shared features) in the representation of the Africans?	%	Raw freq
Dehumanisation	36.64	48	Blackness	20.00	19	Exoticness	27.78	15
Negative	30.53	40	Physicality	17.89	17	Physicality	25.93	14
Point of view	9.16	12	Exoticness	17.89	17	Dehumanisation	18.52	10
Exoticness	8.40	11	Slurs	13.68	13	Blackness	7.41	4
Otherness	6.11	8	*It*-pronoun	11.58	11	Point of view	7.41	4
Physicality	3.05	4	Dehumanisation	11.58	11	Collectives	7.41	4
Collectiveness	2.29	3	Collectives	4.21	4	*It*-pronoun	3.70	2
Language	1.53	2	Point of view	3.16	3	Language	1.85	1
Slurs	1.53	2						
Blackness	0.76	1						

Q2 was designed to get participants thinking about specific language features that they consciously recognised as being reiterated in the representation of the Africans, while Q3 aimed to elicit answers about thematic patterns the participants recognised, even if they were not aware of the linguistic features that conveyed them. In terms of linguistic features (Q2), participants identified references to the physical body of the Africans – specifically to the colour of their skin – and to their assumed exotic features as recurring patterns, as well as dehumanising descriptions. They also recognised the use of racial slurs and the pronoun *it* to refer to African people. Q3 highlights similar aspects ("Exoticness", "Physicality", "Dehumanisation"), suggesting that some participants may have recognised these features independently from the linguistic patterns that convey them. It is important to acknowledge that the answers we collected for Q1 to Q3 do not make the distinction between the three types of textual representation we intended to elicit (general, textual, and thematic) very clear. Rather, the participants merge these different perspectives, for example by mentioning specific linguistic features in Q1 or Q3, referring to more general traits in Q2 or Q3, or describing thematic motifs in Q1 or Q2. Therefore, the answers do not necessarily address what we asked nor do they elicit precisely the expected responses. Despite that, they provide an overall picture of the most recognised aspects of the representation of the Africans as perceived by our population.

Such a picture can be substantiated further by looking at the comments participants wrote for individual extracts. Participants could provide additional comments for any of the extracts they were asked to read. Commenting, though, was not required to proceed with the survey, so the vast majority of participants did not write anything. The average number of comments per extract is 7, with the highest number of comments on the same extract being 12, less than 30% of the whole population. We cannot therefore consider these comments as reflecting the population perception of individual extracts, but we can group them together to provide additional data to complement the previous analysis. Table 5 lists the aspects of the Africans' representation from these optional comments. The most recognised aspects align almost perfectly with what was seen in the answers to Q1 (general representation), with "Dehumanisation", "Negative", "Exoticness", and "Point of view" occupying the top four spots in both cases. This further strengthens the conclusion that the participants identify in the extracts a dehumanised depiction of the Africans, a description that "others" them, emphasising their differences, physical and cultural, compared to and as perceived by the narrator.

Table 5. Representation of the Africans as extracted from the optional comments

Africans' representation aspects in optional comments	%	Raw freq
Dehumanisation	34.11	44
Negative	18.60	24
Exoticness	16.28	21
Point of view	9.30	12
Blackness	4.65	6

Language	4.65	6
Otherness	4.65	6
Physicality	3.88	5
Slurs	3.10	4
Collectiveness	0.78	1

Overall, the answers to the open questions show how the participants consciously perceive the representation of the Africans. This representation is clearly seen as derogatory, in line with the ratings of Q4. The depiction the extracts construct is considered dehumanising and othering, fixated on the Africans' assumed exoticness and difference, especially in terms of physical appearance. This difference is at times recognised as the result of the biased narrator's point of view, who imposes his prejudiced frames of reference to the description. The answers the participants gave are to a large extent a reflection of what they highlighted. In fact, the aspects of the representation pointed out in Tables 4 and 5 match the semantic categories presented in Table 1. In Section 4.1, we grouped the most frequently highlighted words by at least half of the population into five semantic categories: "References", "Physicality", "Exoticness", "Language", and "General negative". The words in "Exoticness", "Physicality", and "General negative" are likely to be playing a major role in the perception of the representation of the Africans as negative, exotic, and focused on their physicality, as expressed by the "Negative", "Exoticness" and "Negative" aspects. The items in the "Language" semantic category can be seen feeding the perception that the language of the Africans is represented as unintelligible, as expressed by the "Language" aspect. Finally, the "References" semantic category does not translate directly into one of the aspects in Tables 4 and 5, but the words in it can be assumed to be contributing to the "Exoticness" (*savages*, *prehistoric man*, *witch*, *sorcerer*), "Blackness" (*black bones*, *black figures*, *black shadows*, *blacks*), and "Negative" (*conquered monster*, *black shadows of diseases and starvation*, *brute*) aspects. What is more, four of the semantic categories in Table 3 – "Physicality", "Exoticness", "References", and "General negatives" – relate to the aspects that were most frequently mentioned by the participants in their open answers, that is, "Physicality", "Exoticness", and "Negative". This suggests that the most highlighted words in Table 3 are fundamental in establishing some of the more noticeable aspects of the fictional representation of Africans in the novel as perceived by our participants.

Before moving on to the concluding remarks, it is interesting to point out that, as with the semantic categories in Section 4.1, the aspects of the Africans' representation as identified by the participants align with the findings of Mastropierro (2017). The semantic preferences resulting from the corpus analysis ("Physicality", "Incomprehensibility", "Collectives", and "General negative", see Mastropierro 2017: 148) match the aspects emerging from the open questions of the present study. Some semantic preferences correspond to aspects that are more prominent than others, but all patterns nevertheless reflect features of the Africans' depiction as recognised by our participants. This

provides further evidence that patterns identified with corpus-stylistic method can be picked up by readers – consciously or not – and contribute to shaping how they perceive given aspects of the fictional world, strengthening the case for an integration of different methods in stylistics, as argued by Mahlberg et al. (2016) and Mahlberg et al. (2019).

5. Conclusion

This paper used reader data to test (i) whether the fictional representation of the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* is perceived as racist and (ii) what motivates this perception. In line with previous research (Mastropierro 2017; Mastropierro & Conklin 2019, 2021), our study showed that participants almost unanimously found the depiction of Africans racist; however, differently from the existing literature, we also identified the exact words and phrases that contribute most to the perception of racism. The racist representation is the result of the combination of a series of textual features: (i) explicitly negative words, such as racial slurs (e.g. *nigger*) and derogatory words (e.g. *monster*); (ii) multi-word references conveying a negative connotation, even when the individual words are not explicitly negative themselves (e.g. *black shadows of disease and starvation*, *belonged to the beginnings of time*, *wild eyed*); (iii) reiterated patterns in the description of the Africans, instantiated in the recurrence of semantic categories (e.g. "Physicality", "Exoticness"). These features are shown to be the most frequently identified by the majority of our participants and, even though their identification is likely related to participants' prior knowledge and the situation of reading, they can nevertheless be assumed to play a key role in motivating the perception of racism. This is further confirmed by the fact that there is an alignment between the most highlighted words and how the participants perceived the representation of the Africans. The most frequently mentioned aspects of their representation are reflections of the linguistic features identified through the highlighting, strengthening the connection between linguistic features and reader response.

These findings make an important contribution to the discussion of race and racism in *Heart of Darkness*. As we explained in Section 2, the matter has been extensively debated from different – and at times contrasting – points of view, but it has been seldom approached stylistically. Our study demonstrated that specific linguistic features consistently take centre stage when our participants were asked to highlight problematic aspects of the text's controversial representation of Africans. These results complement a literary approach: we showed that there is a solid linguistic basis for the perception of racism in the text and we argue that this should be taken into consideration in any critical discussion of the issue. In addition to its relevance in the study of *Heart of Darkness*

specifically, this paper provided further empirical evidence for the relationship between text and reader response, supporting further the assumption that linguistic features can have a direct effect on how readers respond to texts. In particular, our findings show that similarly-trained readers operating within the same social context are likely to associate consistently the same textual features with particular responses.

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