
**CHARLES MARLOW: A *FIELD STUDY OF
MULTILINGUALISM IN THE CONGO BASIN.***

The following document was recently found amongst papers at the University of Brussels. The original cover material (including the author's name) is missing, but it is clearly a report, by a British external examiner, on a doctoral thesis submitted to the University around 1895. It throws interesting light on literary history.

This thesis is a sociolinguistic study of multilingualism along the Congo River. It reports field work undertaken personally by Marlow, as part of a larger project funded by the Belgian government under the general direction of Herr Professor Dr he mult Kurtz (who has no formal university affiliation, but whose work has been recognized by honorary degrees from several European universities).

The basic organization of the thesis is a first-person chronological narrative (unusual in such anthropological work, but not necessarily to be criticised *per se*). Other well known ethnographic work (e.g. by Carlos Castaneda) has used this organization, though it would be usual (as Castaneda himself did) to provide at least a supplementary structural account of the data. However, the chronological organization leads to unnecessary details and lack of clarity in the overall structure. The thesis begins with details of the candidate's trip to Brussels to obtain funding: this would have been better relegated to an Appendix. In addition – something which occurs repeatedly throughout the thesis – these routine practical details are mixed with quite different theoretical points: in this case, a discussion of (somewhat dated) phrenological hypotheses about and the relations between brain shape and behaviour.

The thesis is potentially interesting, and certainly provides new information about languages and tribal customs in the Congo basin, but I have serious reservations about the work, on grounds of content, methodology and style, and I regret that I cannot recommend it for acceptance for a doctoral degree. I justify these points below.

First, Marlow is consistently vague about the geographical location of his fieldwork sites. Anonymity may be necessary to protect informants. However, given the extreme multilingualism of the area, it makes any replication of the work impossible. There are also hints of commercial secrecy being involved, but the dangers of such influence on academic research are not discussed.

Second, Marlow's report of his own linguistic data is sloppy and confusing. With the exception of isolated words, he reports all conversations, no matter in which language they took place, in un glossed English translation. These include a

conversation with a Swedish boat captain (which presumably took place in English), a long (and very boring) conversation about rivets with a co-worker (which presumably took place in French), and similarly a conversation with a Russian (also in French?). The relevance of this to the main theme of local tribal languages is all very dubious. (In addition, his confusion of Cyrillic with a secret code is just embarrassing in an academic work of this nature and should have been silently omitted.) His observations of the pidgin used by the locals are sparse and elementary in the extreme. We get little more than individual sentences: "Mr Kurtz he dead". (And were the natives really using an English-based pidgin in an area colonized predominantly by French speakers?) In a word, many of the ethnographic (and particularly linguistic) details remain hopelessly vague.

Third, Marlow's own work is based partly on extensive prior field work on the local dialects by Kurtz, his research supervisor and the project leader, who had developed an experimental technique to elicit ritual language from the natives. Over a long period, he led the natives to believe that he was a minor deity. This highly innovative technique is probably unique in the anthropological literature, but his work had serious limitations. Kurtz appears to have used one single main informant, a somewhat excentric woman, and in his participant observational work with her he seems to have taken the concept of total immersion in the local community to an extreme: as a result his objectivity in reporting data cannot be entirely trusted. In addition, in persuading the locals that he was a deity, he apparently resorted not only to stealing their ivory, but also to cannibalism. (Was this procedure passed by the ethics committee? Surely not.)

Marlow, to his credit, does not endorse these fieldwork methods, but his own work necessarily relies on some of the – inevitably highly subjective – data which Kurtz collected, and no assessment of these data is provided.

As regards style: The many purple passages (e.g. Biblical symbolism of light and dark, and references to Mephistopheles) might be appropriate in a literary dissertation. (Or are such references usual in the French tradition? I think for example of some of the rhetorical flights in historico-linguistic work by Foucault.) I do not wish to appear too negative in my evaluation. I found much of the account positively exciting. And I realise that I may be seeing this work from a particularly empirical British point of view.

However, if I may be perfectly frank, I recommend that Marlow abandons any attempt at systematic ethnography, and simply rewrites the whole work as a novel.

Recevez, messieurs, l'expression de mes sentiments distingués!