

Assignment SD/01/03

Form and Function of Linguistic Items in Discourse:

Analysis of a Spoken Text

Submitted: January 2002

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1 Introduction

Within discourse analysis it is often the case that the functions of linguistic items in both spoken and written text are not predictable simply from a consideration of their forms. Chaudron (1988: 39) states that although many verbal behaviours can be quickly and confidently identified, there are “frequently finer nuances of meaning and tacit rules of discourse implicit in even the simplest expression...” This can result in the conversion of linguistic items from one function to another relative to the overall proceedings of the discourse. Nunan (1991: 42) adds that in terms of the discourse we are engaged in, “predictability will depend on whether the discourse or text type contain predictable patterns, and also the extent to which we are familiar with these patterns...” Therefore, the contextual environment in which items appear in either a descriptive, expressive or social role has to be considered in order for their function to be accurately evaluated. A detailed summary of the approaches to the analysis of discourse on this issue appears below. In addition, a review of a spoken text in which linguistic items whose functions are not predictable merely from their forms is highlighted. It will be argued that much of the text under examination involves dialogue that is discourse internal and largely interpretable only with reference to the background information the speakers share or from a close evaluation of tone choices each make. In many cases utterances are made under circumstances where the respondent assumes certain background knowledge already ‘in play’ in the discourse that an uninitiated listener might have difficulty interpreting. For a complete version of the transcripts under discussion, refer to Appendix A below.

1 Summary – Review of the Literature

2.1 Grammar and Discourse

When discussing the lack of predictability in spoken human interaction Nunan (1992: 169) states that ambiguity is one of its inherent factors and that the linguistic form of an utterance will not necessarily coincide with the functional intention of that utterance. As a result, many language analysts argue for a separate level of discourse to realize these functional properties. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 27) make a distinction between grammar - concerned with the formal properties of an item, and discourse - with what the speaker is using the item for. Coulthard (1992: 4) claims that grammatical structure is “not sufficient to determine which discourse act a particular grammatical unit realizes – one needs to take account of both relevant situational information and position in the discourse.” To handle this lack of fit between linguistic form and function, Sinclair et al. (1975: 29) suggested a two-stage interpretive process involving information first about situation and then about tactics. Situation refers to:

all relevant factors in the environment, social conventions and the shared experience of the participants, while tactics handles the syntagmatic patterns of discourse, the way in which items precede, follow and are related to each other.

Coulthard (1985: 133) states that one can use situational information to reclassify declarative, interrogative and imperative items as statements, questions and commands but that the discourse value of an item “depends also on what linguistic items have preceded it, what are expected to follow and what do follow.” Such sequence relationships are handled in tactics where items are relabeled. Therefore, it is claimed,

which function a particular grammatical item realizes can only be determined on the basis of its place in the overall discourse.

Linked with this notion of how linguistic forms have their place in discourse realized functionally are the pragmatic constraints that influence them. Brown (1994: 254) claims that: “without the pragmatic contexts of discourse, our communications would be extraordinarily ambiguous.” Stand-alone sentences can, depending on context, be agreement, disagreement, argument, complaint, apology, insult, or simply a comment. Pragmatic constraints therefore play a role in conveying and interpreting meaning and help to determine which function a linguistic form realizes. McCarthy (1991: 18) sees this relationship as one in which “function is arrived at with reference to the participants, roles and settings in any discourse, and... linguistic forms are interpreted in light of these.” In the case of spoken interaction in particular Levinson (1983: 280) states that in many instances:

utterances seem to owe their decisive function in large part to the framework of expectations about the nature of the speech event to which they are contributions. Not only are expectations about the purpose and conduct of the proceedings relevant to this attribution of function, but also, it can be argued, knowledge of social roles.

Brown and Yule (1983: 206-8) claim that because the form and function of natural discourse possesses an inherent mismatch between a speaker’s representation and that of the hearer, the hearer is likely to arrive at a representation only in part similar to the speaker’s and only a reflection of the actual state of affairs. Sometimes these representations can be non-predictable properties deriving from the hearer’s

interpretation of the discourse and highlight, once again, the loose relationship between form and function in language. Speaker and listener co-operation is needed to guarantee that a formal linguistic item is endowed with the functional qualities the speaker intends.

2.2 Descriptive/Functional Categories

Descriptive and functional categories are important in any analysis of spoken interaction, but it is impossible for one theory to account for the arrangement of all linguistic items in predictable ways. One attempt to organize linguistic units into formal categories was the Sinclair-Coulthard model (1975) that utilized a hierarchy, or 'rank scale,' in which 'speech acts' combined to form 'moves' such as eliciting, informing, acknowledging, and directing, etc. Moves then combined to form 'exchanges' which consisted of a three-move structure of initiation, response and follow-up. These, in turn, eventually led to the highest unit in the rank scale - the 'interaction.' Sinclair et al. (in Coulthard 1985: 129) recognized, as well, that there were many occasions in spoken discourse when categories such as elicitation, directive and informative were frequently realized by structures other than the interrogative, imperative and declarative respectively. They claimed such variety arose from the relationship between grammar (in the broad sense) and discourse.

McCarthy (1991: 19) addresses this notion of speech-act labels and their need to describe what is happening in a conversation (i.e. the functions of the parts of individual moves) and states that discourse analysts have found it necessary to expand

and modify the Sinclair-Coulthard model. Often conversations outside the classroom can involve levels of complexity or framing mechanisms - such as verbal supports and elaborated speech acts - that would be uncommon between a teacher and student. For instance, an indirect request will defy the close fit between linguistic form and function and there are many alternative ways in which it can be realized. These ways are not unlimited, however, and as Coulthard (1985: 30) notes: "the constraints of the preceding discourse, the current topic, the facts of the situation and the current speaker's intentions for the progress of the succeeding discourse will all reduce the choice enormously." As a result, speakers continuously 'membership' their co-conversationalists and assume that their listener will engage inference skills to accurately interpret what is being implied.

Both Halliday and Dore (in Coulthard 1985: 164-6) were interested in categorizing utterances functionally and devised a number of levels of description to account for these. Dore used a model outlined by Searle (1969) that recognized speech acts of children consisting of a 'propositional' act and an 'illocutionary' act. Propositional acts consisted of referring and predicating while illocutionary acts handled statements, warnings, and questions, etc. Halliday recognized that more was needed in order to describe speech in functional terms and designed six categories to address the issue (in Coulthard 1985: 164-5) Grice, too, provides a set of 'maxims' by which we might describe conversational contributions under the headings relation, quality, quantity and manner and a 'co-operative principle' which speakers are oriented to in order for a listener to infer what is being communicated. Yet he too recognized that such rules would inevitably be broken and could serve as no more than basic guidelines in

naturally occurring discourse.

Associated with the idea that the functions of linguistic items are not always predictable from a consideration of their forms alone is the notion of ‘existential paradigms.’ McCarthy (in Coulthard 1992: 202-4) states that these are a:

narrow, ever-changing set of paradigms whose limits are discourse-internal, fixed by the interaction of the participants themselves and shifting in real time...they represent ‘that set of possibilities that a speaker can regard as actually available in a given situation’ (Brazil 1985: 41).

These are sets of choices imposed by the real world and the interaction of the moment. It is under such circumstances that a discrepancy can emerge between the form of a particular linguistic item and its function. For instance, McCarthy (1991: 9-10) states that “when we say that a particular bit of speech or writing is a request or an instruction or an exemplification we are concentrating on what that piece of language is doing, or how the listener/reader is supposed to react...” That is, the stretches of language that are carrying the force of requesting, instructing, and so on are seen as performing a particular act. He adds that in order for us to truly understand the function of particular linguistic items we must carefully consider the key situational features and surrounding text they appear in. Roach (2000:198) states that discourse attempts to look at the larger context in which sentences occur and may contain references that presuppose shared knowledge. Therefore, linguistic items must be interpreted in light of what has preceded them in conversation. Coulthard (1985: 144-5) adds that we must:

accept that a speaker can do anything he likes at any time, but at the same time we must recognize that what he does do will be classified as a contribution to

the discourse in the light of whatever structural predictions the previous contribution may have set up – in other words, the structure offered for exchanges is very much an interpretive template which makes predictions about what a speaker will do next provided he chooses to stay within the same exchange.

Under such conditions there is no way that one speaker can constrain another in absolute terms. Subsequently, the functions of the linguistic forms each speaker chooses during interaction have to be considered in relation to the environment in which they occur.

2.3 Phonological Concerns - Intonation

Of the five tones in English (Fall, Rise, Fall-Rise, Rise-Fall, Level) Roach (2000: 158) states that virtually any tone can substitute for another regardless of the context of the situation. He adds (ibid: 199) that the placement of tonic stress is determined, in part at least, by the overall context in which the tone unit occurs. Intonation also assists in determining whether information being conveyed is new, or already possessed by the speaker or listener. Falling tone indicates new information while rising (including falling-rising) tones indicate “shared” or “given” information.” The four most common functional labels for intonation are: attitudinal, accentual, grammatical and discourse. Underhill (1994: 85) defines the discourse function as:

the speaker’s way of organizing and relating together meanings throughout the discourse. Intonation reveals the information structure of the discourse, the relationship between utterances.

McCarthy (1991: 7-8) states, however, that there is sometimes a lack of one-to-one

correspondence between grammatical form and communicative function and that intonation may be one feature affecting our interpretation. This would include variables such as tone contour (a rise or fall in pitch) and pitch levels. He adds that grammatical forms and phonological forms examined separately are “unreliable indicators of function; when they are taken together, and looked at in context, we can come to some decision about function.” When discussing tone choice Roach (2000: 152-3) states that speakers select from a choice of tones according to how they want the utterance to be heard to which Brazil (1994: 16) adds that we have to think of the function of tone units in terms of shared or new information and as being part of some interactive event:

the speaker is thought of as addressing a known listener, or listeners, at a particular moment in time. Each feature then reflects the speaker’s view of what state of background understanding exists at that moment between speaker and listener. This means, of course, that discussion of intonation of isolated sentences must be avoided: the context must always be taken into account.

Intonation and grammar seem to work together in order to contribute to discourse meaning. Yet, McCarthy (1991: 106-9) states: “without lexical or contextual information or other vocal clues we cannot reliably label a tone contour as displaying a particular attitude or emotion.” He goes on to claim that how people express attitudes and emotions is a complex combination of:

vocal cues, intonation, lexis, non-verbal behaviour and contextual factors...and what assumptions the speaker has encoded by tone choice with regard to such things as the state of the hearer’s knowledge, what is recoverable from context and what is ‘newsworthy’ or the centre of focus, that is to say, the interactive level of signaling that intonation can be shown to convey.

He adds that it is important to see tones as fulfilling an interactive role in the signalling

of the ‘state of play’ in discourse. As outlined in the samples of dialogue below, the sorts of decisions a speaker makes in this regard can often be unpredictable when only the form of the items they have used is considered.

3 Analysis of a Spoken Text

3.1 Contextual Background:

Excerpts of Dialogue from “Apocalypse Now”

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola

Loosely based on Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,” the movie under discussion traces the journey of a U.S. Army Captain sent on a special mission deep into the jungles of war-torn Viet Nam in search of a renegade officer accused of murder. The officer under suspicion is a highly decorated Colonel named Walter Kurtz whose disappearance has prompted calls for the termination of his command after it is learned that he has established his own kingdom and no longer takes his orders from anyone, including the Army’s high command. Rumors have reached the civilized world that Kurtz has gone completely insane and is carrying out atrocious crimes that include torture and murder of both his own soldiers and the local natives. Captain Willard is sent up the Nung River in a Navy patrol boat to find the Colonel and ‘terminate’ his command. Various segments of conversation transcribed from the movie are examined below and illustrate how utterances that are made by different characters do not always have the illocutionary force that their grammatical form might lead one to expect.

Each segment of conversation under discussion centers on the interaction of three speakers, all of whom are military personnel. When the characters address each other with either statements or questions they often respond in ways not easy to predict. In many cases a listener might have difficulty interpreting their statements (and, in particular, their tone choices) without the kind of knowledge their shared military background provides them. The dialogue is largely discourse-internal and fixed by the interaction of the participants themselves. Much of what is unpredictable in their speech results from the way in which the characters interact with each other. The purposeful intent of their comments is not always obvious simply from a consideration of their formal properties. They must be interpreted on the basis of their illocutionary force and this can only be accomplished by deciding what job their statements are doing. Where reference is made to a particular set of linguistic items, refer to the attached appendix below.

3.2 Analysis: Excerpt 1

The structure of different character's comments, questions and responses in many cases (avoiding discussion of their possible meaning) are not easily anticipated and one way to help us with interpreting them is through a consideration of the referring tones they utilize. In one scene in the movie a Sergeant enters Captain Willard's hotel room to find it in a state of disorder and Willard recovering from a hangover and a bloody wound in his hand from a broken mirror the night before. The two characters pose questions to each other whose responses, simply from a consideration of their forms, a listener would be unlikely to predict. The interrogative forms each speaker

uses anticipate some kind of answer along the lines of a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ response, not another question. Yet the dialogue operates unpredictably in this way:

- Willard:** What do you want?
Sergeant: Are you all right, Captain?
Willard: What’s it look like?
Sergeant: Are you Captain Willard? Five Hundred and Fifth Battalion?
Hundred and Seventy-Third Airborne? Assigned to SOG?
Willard: Hey, buddy, you gonna shut the door?

Throughout the exchange questions are posed using referring tones and possibly indicate that the answers to both Willard’s and the Sergeant’s questions are already self-evident and shared knowledge between the speakers. The Sergeant uses referring tones to confirm information they both seem to know (i.e. Willard’s identity - no doubt a familiar military routine for both men), and Willard exercises the same right by answering questions with other questions, one of which seems to function as a veiled ‘no’ statement (“What’s it look like?”). He knows the Sergeant is aware of who he is, and the dialogue proceeds along this line of mutual understanding. As a result, neither speaker seems to need to answer questions directly in order to carry out effective communication.

3.3 Analysis: Excerpt 2

As in the segment of dialogue presented above, an element of unpredictability arises when questions to which a listener might anticipate a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response are met with other questions yet are nevertheless functionally successful in allowing speakers to understand one another. Linguistic items of this kind often appear as

questions in form, but as statements in function. Such discontinuity between form (accounted for in the grammar) and function (accounted for in the discourse) underscores the lack of predictability between the two. Brazil (1995: 175) states that:

the fact that a stretch of speech has a secondary purpose is often not indicated in the language: the listener's appreciation of what the telling or the asking counts as depends as often upon what is already known about the situation as upon what is said.

An instance of this appears in an excerpt of dialogue later in the movie (cited below). 'Nha Trang' and 'Com Sec' are discussed from the viewpoint of both participants and do not represent only one speaker's private knowledge. Both are familiar references for each and therefore ground already covered. However, the function of these items and the way they are met with questioning-type responses give them an element of unpredictability for a listener not privy to the discourse internal references of the conversation:

Sergeant: We have orders to escort you to the airfield.
Willard: What are the charges?
Sergeant: Sir?
Willard: What did I do?
Sergeant: There's no charge, Captain. You have orders to report to Com-Sec Intelligence at Nha Trang.
Willard: I see.
Sergeant: Alright?
Willard: Nha Trang, for me?

Discourse conditions, like the ones found in the selection of dialogue above, incline the listeners involved in the conversation towards certain purposeful interpretations and

place what they hear in an interactive context. Therefore, when Willard poses his final question at the very end of the excerpt it takes on the function of a statement his listener can interpret within the shared background knowledge they have of what 'Nha Trang' is and what it represents. Willard's question: "Nha Trang, for me?" is not really a question eliciting a response, but a question form functioning as a veiled 'yes' or 'no' statement responding to the Sergeant's: "Alright?" He assumes the Sergeant will recognize how to interpret it accurately. McCarthy (1991: 120) discusses this mutual dependence of utterances and claims that we can "only be absolutely sure of the function of the initiating utterance... when it is contextualised with the response it gets... and vice versa..." Therefore, Willard's "I see," and the following two pieces of dialogue including the Sergeant's question "Alright?" and the Captain's final "Na Trang, for me?," is an unpredictable arrangement in terms of the kind of three move structure often proposed for exchanges (i.e. initiation, response, follow-up. See Coulthard 1985: 124). With reference to intonation, Willard's final "Na Trang, for me?" uses a referring tone and introduces a reference which does not further present business because it is already in play in the conversation. Brazil (1994: 18-9) states that such shared references help a conversation along by establishing a basis of general understanding. This includes the illocutionary force Willard's final "Na Trang, for me?" carries, allowing the question to remain unanswered yet to function successfully within the discourse conditions of the dialogue.

3.4 Analysis: Excerpt 3

Later in the movie a senior officer cites numerous special operations Captain Willard has been engaged in (from the dossier he has in front of him) and once again referring tones are adopted to identify the shared ground between the speakers. The conversation at this point is operating at a number of different levels and the function of the questions the Colonel asks are not so much to gain information (already evident from the dossier) but to test Willard on how well he has been trained to lie about these operations and his willingness to do so again for the proposed mission they have arranged. The Colonel's referring tones acknowledge that he is aware of Willard's past operations and signal to the Captain that a denial of them is anticipated. However, simply from an evaluation of the linguistic items utilized in the exchange, a realization of their communicative function in this way would be difficult to predict:

- Colonel:** You've worked a lot on your own haven't you, Captain?
- Willard:** Yes, Sir. I have.
- Colonel:** Your report specifies intelligence/counter-intelligence with COMSEC-ICOR.
- Willard:** I'm not presently disposed to discuss those operations, Sir.
- Colonel:** Did you not work for the CIA and COMCORE?
- Willard:** No, Sir.
- Colonel:** Did you not assassinate a government tax collector, Quantri province, June 18, 1968?
- Willard:** Sir, I am unaware of any such activity or operation...Nor would I be disposed to discuss such an operation if, in fact, it did in fact exist...Sir.

As the Colonel might have expected, Willard denies any knowledge or involvement in

the cited operations (which is what he has obviously been trained to do in such situations.) Yet a listener outside the conversation might be confused as to how their exchange can end without the Colonel following up on Willard's denials of factual evidence. This is what Levinson (1983: 281) refers to as the notion of 'inferential schema,' or frame as "a body of knowledge that is evoked in order to provide an inferential base for the understanding of an utterance..." The Colonel's comments appear as questions in form, yet what they are doing functionally is to ask Willard to confirm his assumption that they both share the same viewpoint on various matters and are not really eliciting anything more than this. An exchange of this kind confirms the point that only through an examination of other such contextual factors within the framework of the rest of the movie can we predict the illocutionary function of the characters' responses. Coulthard/Brazil (1992: 63) comment on this sort of linguistic arrangement:

absence of a deterministic relationship between form and function makes it possible for virtually any rejoinder to have coherence given the shared background of understanding of the participants...The satisfactory progress of interactive discourse depends upon participants seeing eye to eye about the classifying power of each contribution.

These conditions depend on speaker and hearer co-operation in order for the formal items used to function as the speaker intends. Each has to negotiate what the other might mean by their response and this cannot be determined on the basis of grammar alone. Participants must draw on the surrounding contextual environment in order to successfully interpret what is being communicated and determine what function a particular form is realizing.

3.5 Analysis: Excerpt 4

Some of the character's statements can be interpreted by the listener as meaning something like: "Although you don't actually pose a question, I take it you are eliciting a 'yes' or 'no' response from me." An instance of this appears in an exchange near the end of Willard's interview with the General, Colonel and others:

General: Well, you see Willard, this war. Things get confused out there. Power, ideals, morality and practical military necessity. But out there, with these natives, it must be a temptation to be God. Because there's a conflict in every human heart, between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil. And good does not always triumph. Sometimes the dark side overcomes what Lincoln called: "the better angels of our nature." Every man has a breaking point. You and I have. Walt Kurtz has reached his. And very obviously he has gone insane.

Willard: ...Yes, Sir... Very much so, Sir... Obviously insane...

The General's statement that Kurtz has "obviously" gone insane functions as an elicitation even though there is no question form to indicate this. However, rising intonation on the General's final tone unit allows his statement to operate as a veiled question and Willard is expected to confirm or deny the statement based on his own assessment of the evidence presented about the renegade Colonel's mental state. In the end, the Captain acknowledges the elicitation with a "yes" response and uses a rising tone to show agreement and a shared viewpoint.

3.6 Analysis: Excerpt 5

Brown (2000: 254) comments that sometimes a sentence contains elements not apparent in the existing surface-level structure which can only be interpreted in relation to their position in context or through the tone choices a speaker assigns to them. For instance, Willard is able to answer the Colonel in the way he does below on the basis of such interaction:

Colonel: Your mission is to proceed up the Nung River in a Navy Patrol boat, pick up Colonel Kurtz's path at Nu Mung Bah, follow it, learn what you can along the way. When you find the Colonel, infiltrate his team by whatever means available and terminate the Colonel's command.

Willard: Terminate...the Colonel?

The Colonel selects a rising tone at the end of his final sentence ("Colonel's command") as if anticipating that Willard will understand what 'terminate' really refers to. Yet under such circumstances we might expect a falling tone at this point in the discourse since the Colonel is supposed to be presenting new information (in terms of what the mission will entail). In fact, the proclaiming tone (accompanied by falling intonation) comes next in Willard's statement: "Terminate...the Colonel" which does not function as a question at all, despite its form. It also ends the exchange. When Willard's tone falls on his final word 'Colonel' it is very much supposed to be interpreted by his listeners as not only a statement confirming that he understands the illocutionary force of the Colonel's comment, but as an affirmation that he will do the job. What would have normally been predicted as a falling tone for the Colonel and a rising tone for the Captain, are in fact

reversed. In such cases, the framework of expectations which encompass a particular speech event seems to decide the decisive function of such utterances. (Levinson 1983: 280).

4 Conclusion

At various points throughout the excerpts of dialogue discussed above speakers engaged in interaction using linguistic items whose function was not always obvious simply from an examination of their formal properties. It was argued that it was often difficult to anticipate the kind of response characters might give to certain statements or questions posed to them. Frequently, the ones they provided functioned in a ways that could not have been predicted simply on the basis of grammatical form and were closely linked with the surrounding contextual environment they appeared in. Even with descriptive categories to help us determine what job certain linguistic items are doing, there fails to be a predictable link or one-to-one relationship between their form and function in this respect. Therefore, if any decisions are to be made about how particular linguistic items are functioning in discourse, they will have to depend to a large extent on contextual factors. In addition, intonation and what a listener can infer from a speaker's utterances have to be considered as an integral part of interpretation and of any analysis of spoken discourse.

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Appendix A:

Excerpts from Movie Script: “Apocalypse Now” – Director: Francis Ford Coppola

Note: (VO) refers to sections of the script that function as a voice over.

In a hotel room in Saigon:

Sergeant: Captain Willard, are you in there?

Willard: Yeah, I’m coming.

Willard (VO): It was a real choice mission...and when it was over...I’d never want another

Willard: What do you want?

Sergeant: Are you all right, Captain?

Willard: What’s it look like?

Sergeant: Are you Captain Willard? Five Hundred and Fifth Battalion? Hundred and Seventy-Third Airborne? Assigned to SOG?

Willard: Hey, buddy, you gonna shut the door?

Sergeant: We have orders to escort you to the airfield.

Willard: What are the charges?

Sergeant: Sir?

Willard: What did I do?

Sergeant: There’s no charge, Captain. You have orders to report to Com-Sec Intelligence at Nha Trang.

Willard: I see.

Sergeant: All right?

Willard: Nha Trang, for me?

Sergeant: Come on, Captain, you still have a few hours to get cleaned up.

Willard: I'm not feeling too good.

Sergeant: Captain? Dave, come here and give me a hand. We've a dead one.

Sergeant: Come on, Captain. Let's take a shower.

Willard: Don't be an ass.

Sergeant: Get hold of him good. We're going to take a shower, Captain.

Sergeant 2: Stand underneath this, Captain.

Willard (VO): I was going to the worse place in the world...and I didn't even know it yet. Weeks away and hundreds of miles up a river...that snaked through the war like a circuit cable...plugged straight into Kurtz. It was no accident that I got to be...the caretaker of Colonel Walter E. Kurtz's memory...anymore than being back in Saigon was an accident. There is no way to tell his story without telling my own. And if his story is really a confession...then so is mine.

Captain Willard being interviewed by different officers in their Quarters on a military base:

Colonel: Captain. Good. Come on in.

Willard: Thank you, sir.

Colonel: Stand at ease.

Willard: General.

Colonel: Captain, have you ever seen this gentleman before?

Willard: No, sir.

Colonel: Met the General or myself?

Willard: No sir. Not personally.

Colonel: You've worked a lot on your own haven't you, Captain?

Willard: Yes, Sir. I have.

Colonel: Your report specifies intelligence/counter-intelligence with COMSEC-ICOR.

Willard: I'm not presently disposed to discuss those operations, Sir.

Colonel: Did you not work for the CIA and COMCORE?

Willard: No, Sir.

Colonel: Did you not assassinate a government tax collector, Quantri province, June 18, 1968?

Willard: Sir, I am unaware of any such activity or operation...Nor

would I be disposed to discuss such an operation if, in fact, it did in fact exist...Sir.

Later in the interview, discussing finding Colonel Kurtz who has gone missing in the jungle:

General: Well, you see Willard, this war. Things get confused out there. Power, ideals, morality and practical military necessity. But out there, with these natives, it must be a temptation to be God. Because there's a conflict in every human heart, between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil. And good does not always triumph. Sometimes the dark side overcomes what Lincoln called: "the better angels of our nature." Every man has a breaking point. You and I have. Walt Kurtz has reached his. And very obviously he has gone insane.

Willard: ...Yes, Sir... Very much so, Sir... Obviously insane...

Colonel: Your mission is to proceed up the Nung River in a Navy Patrol boat, pick up Colonel Kurtz's path at Nu Mung Bah, follow it, learn what you can along the way. When you find the Colonel, infiltrate his team by whatever means available and terminate the Colonel's command.

Willard: Terminate...the Colonel?

General: He's out there operating without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct. And he's still on the field commanding troops.

Aide: Terminate with extreme prejudice.

Colonel: You understand, Captain, that this mission does not exist, nor will it ever exist.