Was it about caring or about resisting? Discursive representations of the postcolonial relationship between Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo

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From a cognitive linguistics perspective, the meaning of situations and events is the object of a constant discursive construction (Hart 2017, Talmy 2000). This discursive meaning is not fixed, but permanently interacts with an evolving context (Crespo-Fernández 2021) and exists amidst a certain number of alternative discourses (Vandenberghe 2014). European colonial history provides an illustrative example of these tensions, with the uprising of colonial discourse having shaped a hierarchical representation of superior colonisers versus inferior colonised (Elaref 2023), while alternative conceptualisations have precisely refused this conceptualisation (Thomas 2023). The case of Belgian colonisation of Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo) is no exception to this phenomenon, and traces of these competing discourses can be found in current debates related to postcolonial issues (e.g. possible apologies for colonial crimes) (Goddeeris 2015).

This study approaches such representations from the perspective of the agentivity of respectively Belgium and the RDC concerning actions related to the (post)colonial period. Agentivity is understood as "causal relation between an agent entity, an intentional action and the state of who is affected by the effects of the action" and constructed through multiple linguistic means (e.g. semantic roles, syntactic function, syntactic position) (De Cock & Michaud Maturana 2014). In a postcolonial context, it provides interesting insights into such discourses given i) the fact that colonial discourse traditionally presents the capacity to act as a characteristic of colonisers, and ii) the possible interplay between being attributed responsibility for negative actions committed during the colonial period, and being asked to contribute to a reparation for them. In order to explore these possible interactions, I analyse the representation of Belgium and the DRC in three different kinds of recently produced discourses: official speeches delivered by Belgian king Philip during his visit to the DRC in 2022, comments on social media written by Congolese reacting to this visit, and Belgian press articles addressing topics related to the postcolonial relationship. After having extracted every reference to Belgium or to the DRC in these productions, I code them on the basis of different parameters related to agentivity (such as semantic roles, syntactic functions). This offers quantitative findings, which are complemented with a qualitative analysis. I furthermore investigate the extent to which the degree of agentivity associated with the two countries varies depending on whether the sentence in which the reference is embedded addresses the Belgian colonial period (when the actions committed can lead to demands for compensation), or later periods of time. Preliminary findings suggest that Philip's official speeches propose an unequal representation of a very agentive Belgium versus a very little agentive DRC, which is maintained when he talks about the colonial period as long as it comes to actions considered to be positive. The Congolese social media commentators, by contrast, seem to more clearly address a range of colonial crimes and construe a more agentive representation of the DRC. Finally, I expect press articles to show varying agentivity patterns depending on to whom they give a voice (i.e. afro-descendent communities, NGOs, politicians, etc.).