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LEXICONS OF POWER: A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC EXAMINATION OF HIERARCHICAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTS IN POP CULTURE-NOLAN'S THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of language in Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight Trilogy. Words become tools for power, identity, and control in Gotham. Focusing on the trilogy's three main villains—Ra's al Ghul, the Joker, and Bane—the paper examines how each uses language to challenge Gotham's social and moral order. Ra's al Ghul employs a cold, philosophical discourse to frame his destructive actions as part of a grand design for balance. The Joker disrupts social norms with chaotic, nihilistic speech, using language to unravel Gotham's established rules, while Bane uses rhetoric as a weapon of revolution and domination, blending populist ideals with coercive speech to manipulate the city's people and power structures. In contrast, Batman uses language as a tool to maintain order. His controlled speech reflects a balance of justice and fear. This black and white comparison shows the villains' ideological assaults with his own moral resolve. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory and cinematic critique, this study argues that Gotham is built not only of bricks and shadows but also of words. Nolan's trilogy transforms language into a battlefield where power and identity are continuously negotiated through dialogue, offering a fresh perspective on the films by emphasizing the significance of language in shaping Gotham's moral and political landscape.

KEYWORDS:- Sociolinguistics, Language and identity, Nihilism, Power dynamics, Moral ambiguity, Cinematic language.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay analyses The Dark Knight Trilogy by Christopher Nolan from a sociolinguistic perspective. Language shapes identity and power structures in the real world. A dystopian Gotham is no different. Prior discussions and cinematic analyses frequently focus on narrative structure or visual aesthetics. Language can be an effective instrument for influencing character dynamics. Particularly between Batman and his adversaries. By analysing the dialogues of Batman, the Joker, Bane, and Ra's al Ghul, this research delves into how words are used to project power. Establish authority, and deconstruct identities within Gotham.

The trilogy re-imagines Gotham not just through its physicality but through the rhetoric and linguistic play that underpins the city's moral and political fabric. Batman's terse, controlled speech reflects a calculated suppression of identity, mirroring his fragmented persona between Bruce Wayne and the vigilante. In contrast, the villains' language is performative and theatrical: the Joker's chaotic ramblings unravel the illusion of societal order, Bane's lofty monologues are imbued with philosophical weight that challenges Gotham's structural hierarchy, and Ra's al Ghul's refined speech reveals an almost aristocratic command of power and destiny. By using these language devices, Nolan re-imagines these classic comic book characters. Their words transcend the moral bounds of Gotham. Language creates power in The Dark Knight Trilogy. Words shape Gotham. Words become a battlefield for identity and control.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Dark Knight Trilogy by Christopher Nolan has been examined from a variety of angles. When the first film came out in 2005, it renovated the superhero genre. With each release Nolan became a household name for the caped crusader. Critics and general moviegoers acclaimed the film for its dark and gritty tone. Nolan's directing style itself was a commentary of philosophical ramifications of Batman. The socio-political criticisms within each of the films made them relatable to our own contemporary world. This literature review seeks to place the current research within the broader discourse of cinematic language, power hierarchies, and performativity in superhero films, while underscoring the need for deeper analysis of Nolan's use of dialogue as a narrative tool in Gotham's reimagining.

The intersection of language and power in cinema has long been a subject of study. Michel Foucault's theories on discourse shaped much of the early research. Foucault's concept of power as diffuse, embedded in language, and enacted through discourse finds relevance in the study of The Dark Knight Trilogy. Studies like those by David Bordwell (2012) on cinematic language argue that dialogue in film is more than just a vehicle for plot—it is a mechanism for controlling meaning and shaping power relations within narrative structures. Bordwell's work focuses on how language

directs audience interpretation and organises character hierarchies, setting the foundation for this research.

In line with Bordwell's theories, research on superhero films, particularly studies such as those by James Gilmore (2018) and Will Brooker (2012), examine the ways in which superheroes wield authority through rhetoric. These studies provide foundational insight into the performative nature of superhero identities—how language is weaponized to sustain or dismantle structures of power. Gilmore, emphasises the performative authority placed on superheroes. Because they frequently act as spokespeople for society morals. In a similar vein, Brooker delves into Batman's persona as a "protector". One whose power rests on his capacity to frighten and subdue. This is done through symbolic language. This symbolism is evident in the words of the villains too. However, the distinction between Batman and villains is subtle but important. Both parties are intimidating in their linguistic choices. But one inspires duty the other inspires fear into the hearts of Gotham.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach. It is focusing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the dialogues and linguistic patterns in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy*. The study relies on sociolinguistic theories and cinematic critique. The primary goal is to uncover how language functions as a tool of power and identity construction. By examining the linguistic devices employed by protagonist and the antagonists, this study aims to address how words contribute to shaping Gotham's sociopolitical dynamics. Rather than solely visual or action-based elements how linguistic narratives direct the flow of power and identity.

3.1 Research Questions

RQ1 How do the key villains of *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (Ra's al Ghul, the Joker, and Bane) use language as a tool to challenge, destabilize, and redefine power structures in Gotham City?

RQ2 How does Batman utilize language to counteract the threats posed by these villains, and how does this linguistic engagement reflect his own identity and sense of justice?

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Dialogue Analysis: The primary data for this research consists of the dialogues from all three films in *The Dark Knight Trilogy: Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). The study focuses on key scenes where power dynamics are at play, such as confrontations between Batman and his adversaries, public speeches, and dialogues that explicitly address issues of morality, identity, and societal control. Transcripts of these films are retrieved from licensed film scripts and official screenplays to ensure accuracy.

3.2.2 Film Reviews and Critical Analysis: Secondary data is collected from a variety of critical film reviews and scholarly articles analyzing the trilogy's philosophical and thematic elements. These sources offer insight into how audiences and scholars have previously interpreted the films' themes and the role of dialogue. Reviewing critiques provides additional context for analyzing the impact of language within the films.

3.2.3 Character-Specific Language Patterns: The study examines each villain's distinct style of language use. Ra's al Ghul's calculated, philosophical tone is analyzed against the Joker's chaotic and anarchistic rhetoric and Bane's revolutionary and coercive speech. Batman's dialogue is also scrutinized to understand how his language differs from or mirrors that of his enemies, and how it supports his dual identity as both Bruce Wayne and Gotham's protector.

3.3 Framework of Analysis

The research adopts a framework based on **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**, particularly inspired by the works of Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, to analyze how power is constructed, maintained, or subverted through language in the films. The CDA approach is apt for this study, as it allows for an examination of the relationship between language, power, and society within the cinematic texts. It helps to reveal underlying power structures and ideological struggles expressed through language.

The analysis is divided into two stages:

3.3.1 Lexical Choices and Power Representation: The study identifies specific lexical choices (word choices, phraseology, rhetorical devices) used by the characters, focusing on how these choices signify authority, control, or challenge to power structures. For example, Ra's al Ghul's intellectualized and elitist discourse reflects his belief in moral superiority, while the Joker's language is marked by a subversive playfulness and unpredictability that undermines societal order. Bane's speeches, on the other hand, are charged with revolutionary fervor and populist rhetoric, creating a facade of liberation while enforcing his domination.

3.3.2 Dialogue as Identity Formation: The second stage of the analysis focuses on how the dialogues of the key characters contribute to their identities and public personas. Batman's use of language reflects his internal conflict between fear and justice, and his reliance on controlled, measured speech reinforces his role as Gotham's protector. In contrast, the villains use language to dismantle or reshape identity—for example, the Joker's goal of stripping people of their moral façades and showing them their “true” selves, and Bane's emphasis on exposing Gotham's fragility.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Superhero Film Villains: Analysing Speech Patterns

While several scholars have examined the psychological profiles of Batman's villains, relatively few have analysed the villains' use of language as a rhetorical tool for undermining Gotham's order. Critiques such as those by Geoff Klock (2002) and Jörg Helbig (2014) have emphasised the thematic roles of chaos and control in Nolan's films, yet do not adequately focus on how the villains' linguistic styles serve as vehicles for these thematic elements. Klock acknowledges the intricacy of postmodern superheroes and their morally dubious antagonists in *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, but he also provides room for more investigation into the spoken exchanges that characterise these moral struggles.

On the other hand, Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández (2016) and Álex Martín Escribá (2016) delve into the deconstruction of heroism through linguistic frameworks. In *El Caballero Oscuro: La Ambigüedad Moral de Batman*, Rodríguez-Hernández highlights the subversive nature of villain rhetoric, particularly through characters like the Joker, whose chaotic, deconstructive language is central to his power. He notes that the Joker's words are not random but function as a deliberate means to destabilise Gotham's moral codes. However, this research remains primarily focused on the villain's philosophical implications, rather than the performative aspects of language itself.

4.2 Gotham's Linguistic Reimagination

Scholars such as Martin Fradley (2011) in *The Global Gotham* have observed that the physical and visual characteristics of Gotham City are often given priority in existing literature when defining the city's identity. Fradley emphasises how Nolan drew inspiration for Gotham from actual urban landscapes, focusing on the visual signals found in architecture and surroundings that give the movie a realistic feel. However, considering the conflicting views of its main protagonists, the language structure of Gotham is commonly ignored. Gotham transforms into a discursive space where, in addition to physical power, language is utilised to both establish and contest power.

While previous literature effectively establishes the importance of physical spaces in Gotham's identity, few have ventured into the socio-linguistic terrains that define the city's power dynamics. Political power is actual power in Gotham. The dialogues between Batman and his enemies shape Gotham's political institutions. In this way, language plays a central role in the power structures within the trilogy. The concept of a dark-dystopia for linguistic backdrops is discussed in less traditional critiques, such as the work of James Naremore (2013) in *Film Noir: A Very Short Introduction*. He suggests that film noir settings like Gotham are not just dark and dangerous. They are linguistically coded environments, infused with language that constructs their dangerous allure.

While previous literature effectively establishes the importance of physical spaces in Gotham's identity, few have ventured into the socio-linguistic terrains that define the city's power dynamics. The words exchanged between Batman and his enemies shape the moral structures of Gotham. Language, in this sense, is integral to the power hierarchies in the trilogy. Here characters rise or fall not only by their actions but by their ability to articulate and perform power through discourse.

4.3 Batman: The Fragmented Identity and Controlled Language

Bruce Wayne, in his role as Batman, personifies the conflict between two identities; this idea is evident in his restrained and understated vocabulary. Batman's discourse is strikingly clear, deliberate, and purposely ambiguous. His choice of words reflects his vigilante persona of hiding in the shadows and carefully controlling his public identity. He has changed his voice to a deep, gravelly one that highlights his defence of Gotham and distance from Bruce Wayne's complex emotional landscape while also acting as a weapon of intimidation. Batman uses clipped, forceful phrases that are usually direct and succinct, reflecting his internalised tension between upholding justice and inspiring fear. For example, his famous line, "I'm whatever Gotham needs me to be," suggests that Batman's identity is fluid, shaped by the needs of the city rather than personal motivations.

Table 1: Batman's Signal Words and Phrases

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Signal Words / Phrases</i>	<i>Context / Interpretation</i>
Confrontation with Carmine Falcone (<i>Batman</i>)	"It's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me."	Batman emphasizes action over identity, reinforcing his role as Gotham's protector rather than focusing on his personal identity as Bruce Wayne.
Final battle with Ra's al Ghul (<i>Batman Begins</i>)	"I won't kill you, but I don't have to save you."	A morally ambiguous stance, highlighting Batman's adherence to his no-kill rule, while allowing Ra's to face the consequences of his actions.
Confrontation with the Joker (<i>The Dark</i>)	"I have one rule."	Batman's strict moral code is a source of strength but also a vulnerability that the Joker attempts to exploit.
Confrontation with Bane (<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>)	"You have my permission to die."	Batman reclaims his power and control over Bane after being physically and mentally broken earlier in the film.
Final scene with the Joker (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	"This city just showed you that it's full of people ready to believe in good."	Batman's belief in the resilience of Gotham's people, countering the Joker's nihilism with hope and moral integrity.

But it also highlights Batman's limitations as a result of this language. He conveys authority through his strong and fearsome language. But it also suggests a sacrifice. Cost of the identity of the self. The individualism. A performance that hides the frail human inside the mask. In sharp contrast to Batman's serious speech, Bruce Wayne's vocabulary is informal and often light-hearted. Batman uses fear as a tactic. Bruce Wayne uses humour as one. Each ego connects to a different method of speech. This linguistic dualism highlights how fragmented his identity is. It shows how a single person can be two different personas just by changing how he talks and what he says. Batman villains are always boastful. They announce their plans with horrifying glory. All the main villains of the trilogy have one thing in common. They take great pleasure in their use of language. In contrast to his adversaries, Batman speaks with restraint. He never talks unless he has to. This proves his ongoing struggle. This struggle is between his duties as protector and enforcer. He struggles to balance his pain and trauma and his sense of duty. "Each with our own personal demon, as the saying goes...." He is no different because he is also human underneath that mask. His moral struggle is reflected in his speech. The use of his language is a battleground where he attempts to balance his contradictory identities.

4.4 Chaos in Language as a Tool of Nihilism

Unlike Batman, who speaks in a controlled manner, the Joker speaks in an uncontrolled, chaotic fashion. He utilises words to undermine the basic concepts of meaning and order. His speaking patterns exhibit a sort of nihilistic playfulness. He called himself 'an agent of chaos in *The Dark Knight*. A disturbed individual that exposes the folly of social structures. He also challenges

established hierarchies. The Joker’s language is deliberately chaotic. It is a verbal manifestation of his rejection of rules, norms, and values. His dialogue is filled with contradictions. He is unpredictable, as are his words. He often uses humour that is disturbing. His linguistic choices mirror his philosophical outlook. Life is random, and chaos reigns supreme.

Table 2: The Joker’s Signal Words and Phrases

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Signal Words / Phrases</i>	<i>Context / Interpretation</i>
Bank robbery opening (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	“I believe whatever doesn’t kill you simply makes you... stranger.”	The Joker mocks traditional wisdom about survival and strength, revealing his worldview of chaos and subversion.
Interrogation scene with Batman (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	“I’m not a monster. I’m just ahead of the curve.”	The Joker presents himself as an agent of chaos who exposes the hypocrisy and fragility of societal norms.
Confrontation with the mob (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	“It’s not about money. It’s about sending a message.”	The Joker rejects materialism, focusing instead on disrupting the order and instilling fear, signaling his anarchic motives.
Final confrontation with Batman (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	“You have nothing—nothing to threaten me with! Nothing to do with all your strength!”	The Joker ridicules Batman’s conventional methods of control, exposing the limits of physical power when faced with chaos.
Conversation with Harvey Dent (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	“Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and	The Joker’s philosophy in a nutshell—he seeks to dismantle order, believing chaos is the natural state of existence.

The Joker's monologues often toy with moral relativism. His language destabilised Gotham’s belief in justice and order. His most famous line goes “Introduce a little anarchy, upset the established order and everything becomes chaos.” This quote reveals his belief in the weakness of societal constructs. Here, the Joker uses language as a weapon to draw attention to how arbitrary Gotham's moral structures are. He frequently addresses Batman in his discourse. It is not only to rile him up but also to entice him to play a language game. These conversations test his inflexible moral code. As a result, the Joker uses language as a tool of control. He often switches the focus from action to discourse. In addition to trying to burn the whole city he puts Batman in a duel of words. This represents the anarchy he wants to achieve.

The Joker’s language serves as both a philosophical statement and a performative act of power. He rejects the structured discourse of authority figures and introduces a rhetoric of disorder, destabilizing Gotham through words before ever lifting a finger. This subversion of language becomes central to the Joker’s identity: he is the embodiment of chaos not just through action, but through discourse, turning language into a tool of anarchy.

4.5 The Use of Rhetoric to Subjugate and Inspire

In contrast to the Joker, Bane uses vocabulary that is intended to convey authority and control. Speaking with a sense of intellectual authority, he makes lofty claims that paint him as both the leader of a revolution and the oppressor of the citizens of Gotham. His speech touches on themes of power and destruction. It demonstrates a profound connection with revolutionary vocabulary. This language is ironic because Bane's "liberation" of Gotham eventually takes the form of ruthless dominance. Yet his language is also deeply coercive, aimed at subjugating both Gotham's citizens and its ruling elites. His monologues are didactic, functioning as both a form of persuasion and a method of psychological warfare.

Table 3: Bane's Signal Words and Phrases

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Signal Words / Phrases</i>	<i>Context / Interpretation</i>
Stadium speech (<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>)	"I give it back to you... the people."	Bane presents himself as a liberator, playing on populist rhetoric to manipulate Gotham's citizens into supporting his cause.
Fight with Batman (<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>)	"You merely adopted the dark; I was born in it, molded by it."	Bane asserts dominance over Batman, emphasizing his superior mastery of fear and pain through powerful, vivid imagery.
Reveal of Gotham's doom (<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>)	"I'm Gotham's reckoning."	Bane positions himself as an agent of justice and retribution, echoing Ra's al Ghul's goal of punishing Gotham for its sins.
Confrontation with Bruce in the Pit (<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>)	"Hope... I will feed it to them. Hope, to poison their souls."	Bane weaponizes hope, using it as a tool to manipulate and ultimately break the spirit of Gotham and Bruce Wayne.
Final battle with Batman (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	"So, you came back to die with your city?"	Bane taunts Batman's loyalty to Gotham, portraying Batman's actions as futile and misguided.

Bane's use of language contrasts sharply with Batman's terse speech. While Batman controls language to maintain order, Bane uses it to dismantle existing power structures, positioning himself as a voice of authority in the chaos he orchestrates. Bane uses language to create terror in his people but he also uses it to motivate them to be faithful to him. His words are not merely destructive. This is how Bane's language symbolises duality. It is a tool for both fueling the revolution and maintaining control.

4.6 The Aristocratic Language of Destiny and Power

As the creator of the League of Shadows, Ra's al Ghul uses language that expresses authority. He is portrayed in the comic books as a destiny-setter. His discourse is composed, aristocratic, and philosophical. He frequently replies with allusions to morals and the natural order. Ra's al Ghul

positions himself as a guardian of balance. As the villain of the first film in the trilogy, his language is filled with a sense of ancient wisdom.

Table 4: Bane's Signal Words and Phrases

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Signal Words / Phrases</i>	<i>Context / Interpretation</i>
Training Bruce (<i>Batman Begins</i>)	“Theatricality and deception are powerful agents.”	Ra’s teaches Bruce the value of perception and illusion as tools for instilling fear and asserting power.
Reveal of the League of Shadows’ goal (<i>Batman Begins</i>)	“Gotham must be destroyed.”	Ra’s articulates his vision of justice through destruction, seeking to cleanse Gotham of its corruption by erasing it.
Final confrontation with Bruce (<i>Batman Begins</i>)	“You were my greatest student... but I could never teach you to mind your surroundings.”	Ra’s condescends to Bruce, using language that diminishes his former pupil while asserting his own superiority.
Monologue on justice and balance (<i>Batman Begins</i>)	“Crime cannot be tolerated. Criminals thrive on the	Ra’s philosophy of extreme justice, showing his belief in uncompromising action against perceived societal weakness.
Face-off with Bruce (<i>Batman Begins</i>)	“We sacked Rome, loaded trade ships with plague rats... Gotham’s time has	Ra’s draws on history to justify his actions, invoking the League’s legacy as a force for destructive renewal.

His conversations with Bruce Wayne revolve around existential questions of justice and order. With Ra’s often framing his destructive actions as necessary corrections to societal decay. In *Batman Begins*, Ra’s al Ghul frequently uses the language of inevitability and destiny to justify his extreme methods, as when he declares, “If someone stands in the way of true justice... you simply walk up behind them and stab them in the heart.” His speech embodies a cold detachment from conventional morality, rooted in a belief that his actions are justified by a higher calling. This linguistic detachment highlights the dispassionate nature of his power—he perceives himself not as a villain, but as a necessary force in maintaining the balance of the world.

Ra’s al Ghul’s language is distinct in its elevation of ideas over emotions, contrasting with the raw chaos of the Joker and the revolutionary fervor of Bane. His calm, calculated speech acts as a rhetorical weapon, used to seduce Bruce Wayne into adopting a more ruthless form of justice. The performative quality of his language positions him not as a mere antagonist, but as a philosophical counterpoint to Batman’s own struggle with morality and power.

5. CONCLUSION

Language is more than just conversation in *The Dark Knight Trilogy*. it is the cornerstone of the power battles. Throughout the films Nolan pointed out how these power battles determine Gotham's

destiny. Batman's restrained voice is a reflection of his inner struggle. It maintains his righteousness. The Joker's chaotic rhetoric tears at the fabric of Gotham's moral structures, while Bane's revolutionary language seeks to subjugate through manipulation of ideological discourse. Ra's al Ghul's aristocratic speech, meanwhile, reflects his cold, deterministic view of the world's balance.

The linguistic performances are central to the trilogy's exploration of identity and power. Gotham is not just a city of shadows and skyscrapers. It is a city of words. In Nolan's adaptation, the struggle for Gotham is fought in the discourse. This discourse questions the city's social structures. Because of this, The Dark Knight Trilogy offers a wealth of opportunities to study how language shapes reality. A dystopian utopia like Gotham becomes relatable because it mirrors our own struggles in society. A masterclass in Contemporary filmmaking. Nolan uses unforgettable linguistics just as much as action.

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7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND FUNDING

I am stating that all ethics of research was kept in high regard during this study; Also noting that no AI tools were used illegally. Only to rephrase some sentences for linguistic clarity. No official fundings were granted for these investigations.

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