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# THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF PERSONABLE VILLAINY AND WINSOME KNAVES: ENTER ANAKIN SKYWALKER AND CORIOLANUS SNOW

*Abstract: The multifaceted human personality apparatus tirelessly and somewhat incessantly keeps on giving rise to both surprising and equally dishearteningly bland revelations as regards to how the idiosyncratic denizens of this blue-hued marble encode and decipher various cultural phenomena. This is particularly pertinent in view of the relentless endeavours to peel off the deeper layers of the pseudo-proverbial human cognitive onion. It would doubtless come across as supremely hauteur-suffused should a paper harbour a latent claim to fame in terms of comprehensiveness and immaculate insight into what appears to be nothing short of a rabbit hole-like bottomless pit of hopeless scholarly efforts at inching ever so slightly more towards the neighbourhood of the metanarrative fount of all creativity and meaning. Therefore, the succeeding pages shall do away with that specific delusion and attempt to labour under merely one and relatively monotonous question: how do we go about explaining the impulse to root for the prototypical villain instead of bowing to the infinitely promulgated notion of archetypal goodness?*

*The conception of strength and weakness is attached to the discussion in order to substantiate the propositional mosaic herein stipulated. Bearing this in mind, a greater degree of free expression no longer obtains for our generation unless attained by dint of explicit, yet veiled of norm-dictated defiance.*

*This inflexibility dovetails neatly with the first assertion at the outset in the hope of shedding off a shroud of superfluous duplicity so successfully inculcated that it now, perhaps, gives the reader pause to learn that human cognition is deeply convoluted,*

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*leaning dangerously to the dark side of the mind and conceptualisation. Claims that linguistic adepts favour the through line of goodness over evil are handily belied, which, in itself, is not a bad thing necessarily. It might even be daring to think it a liberating and healing modicum of catharsis.*

Keywords: *human personality apparatus, cultural phenomena, cognitive and linguistic adepts, cognition and language, duplicity, villainy, catharsis.*

## **1. Supplanting an introduction: multiple personae as an echo of a healthy mind**

An apt metaphor comes in handy at this point; the one of the aforementioned layered onion to be more precise, and for the purpose of this paper it reads:

### **HUMAN BEINGS ARE A NUANCED MULTITUDE OF VENEERS**

Quite unsurprisingly, this may give off a dental resonance but it does bring home the crux of the target message. This is a consummate garden-variety breed of conceptual metaphor(s) predicated on the tenets Lakoff so ardently championed and the domains the better part of cognitive linguistics is moored in. It would be remiss to not cast our mind back to the basics by way of a fleeting reminder: domains are construed as cognitive entities, representational spaces and conceptual complexes of varying levels of intricacy and organisation. Social media-driven parlance steadily and markedly morphs into a pervasive communicative pattern asserting itself as an integral section of the prevailing culture of the day. The volte-face towards what used to be relegated discourse begs the question as to the tendencies and extent of these ongoing processes.

Indeed, when veneers begin to crack, what remains is a soberingly blunt home truth. The interplay of the source and the target domain is easily detected as the formula *A is B* is applied to an aspect of human behaviour. As a result, we no longer see human beings as life forms, but rather as a matrix of considerable complexity requiring a closer look and a very deep dive. The concept of multiple personae fits neatly into this ideational amalgam. It should, however, not be mistaken for a more serious psychiatric disorder i.e. multiple personality, though, in some cases, the pathways may easily coalesce. Just for now, we remain in the realm of sound mind and salubrious thoughts.

On that note, a cut and dried distinction ought to be made between morals and manners. Johnston (1916) had said *catena* under review a time immemorial ago, but the proposition still rings true: morals are natural and manners are artificial. This is

to be qualified by the not so simple expedient of conflicting definitions concerning the precepts of morality and ethics, the former tentatively being subjective, whereas the latter approximately objective, all the while bearing in mind that no universally agreed-upon denotation can be seen as definitive.

Stemming from these inchoate starting blocks, it is not outside the realm of the possible, nor beyond the orbit of conceivable that the anthropocentric conceptual system operates more creatively and favourably along the more dissolutely diverting and rakish parameters. However, the parameters do not easily pay obeisance to the sempiternal perimeters or bend the knee to the will of the conventionalised form of decorum and propriety. It does follow that linguistic adepts, hereinafter communicators, more often than not, find themselves in dire need of an antidote to the opulent avalanche of socially constructed and diligently foisted motifs of good(ness) and the right side of history. A spark of rascally rebellion might be par for the course in terms of description and explication of this outré instantiation of human behaviour.

To further the cause of this study, another metaphor is added to the analytical nexus:

#### COMMUNICATION IS A VEIL OF MANACLES

A thought-provoking Jungian precept of a shadow self springs to the fore. It stands as a hypothesised aspect of one's cognitive mosaic that we deem unsavoury, unwholesome and even "unholy". The "shadow" resides in the deep and distant recesses of societally acceptable confines doomed to be shied away from and excommunicated as shameful. Nonetheless, this link in the cognitive chain is far from susceptible to being perfunctorily binned and consigned without due diligence to mere irrelevance. Perhaps, even regrettably so, it proves irrepressibly resilient, and every so often it bursts forth decimating all the meticulously contrived laws, guidelines and modalities of appropriacy.

Communicators are indubitably inclined towards a kaleidoscopic myriad of equally mystifying and mesmerising basilects and acrolects across the board have indeed done continual battle over the notions of morals and manners of the "spoken" output generated by dint of an either preferred or accessible linguistic mechanism. It comes as no surprise that the bone of contention is not to remain buried, what with the ever-deepening and widening margin of disparity neither taken in good part nor always seen as a "licenced" variant of language and linguistic conduct.

The commercialisation of social media content is a prevalent packaging and delivery expedient of present-day communication systems. In order to appeal

to a wide-ranging strata of audiences, new media routinely employ remodelling strategies, thus morphing the otherwise grave and disturbing conceptual items into entertainment-tailored, light-hearted subjects. This is exactly how the unsavoury becomes the palatable. This is an inflection point where morals and manners merge and where the basilect, in form as well as thought, prevails. This upper hand should be observed from the standpoint of unbridled honesty, and an act of semi-requited love. These leanings are patent in lexical configuration of leading social media platforms. Albeit the socials are routinely and somewhat anachronistically subsumed under the category of new media, the advent of the Internet redefined the circulation of erstwhile paper-based editions steadily being supplanted by the digitised format in turn blurring the distinction between old-time and “newfangled” outlets. This phenomenon in the public sphere seems to have become a pervasive communicative pattern. It has an ineluctable knack for showbizification and delineation of overarching sentiments, de-rezzing and re-coupling the wokely correct perceptions.

To encapsulate it in starkly simple terms: it is fine to like the baddie again. Not only is it okay, it is liberatingly healthy. This asseveration should beg the question of countless whys and wherefores and there lies the rub. Communicators are, metaphorically and psychologically speaking, remarkably intricate and cut from the multifarious cloth. The veneers and manacle may beggar belief but they substantiate the conceptual structuring of multiple personae, and one of them, by dint of metanarratives and perceptual ossification, bombinates with the impulse to defy, thereby shining an elucidatory light on this baffling conundrum. Communicators can be good but root for the villain simply because there are numerous avenues to relate, empathise and even identify with their venality, which, if left unshackled, does, for the most part, remain in the domain of venality on the part of linguistic adepts. Irrespective of what evaluations may be imparted on communicators’ overt or covert propinquities, the human onion, when carefully peeled, unearths both the light and the dark cavorting in a perpetual dance of equilibrium and homeostasis.

## 2. The fourteen evolutionary traps and why (not) to avoid them

One of the more plausible probes into the course humanity is on saw the light of day in late 2023. A group of scientists compiled a list of putative threats they appositely christened *traps* for the purpose of their research. A cognitive linguist cannot but pounce on the metaphorical nature of some of the items in the repository.

1. Simplification
2. Growth-for-growth
3. Overshoot
4. Division
5. Contagion
6. Infrastructure lock-in
7. Chemical pollution
8. Existential technology
9. Technological autonomy
10. Dis- and misinformation
11. Short-termism
12. Overconsumption
13. Biosphere disconnect
14. Local and social capital loss

The comprehensive and annotated list is available at the website of the Royal Society behind this endeavour (see the source and reference section), but for the purpose of this paper, only a few are employed. The items here are enumerated in support of this study's research tenor and serve as a cohesive lynchpin between real-life and factitious on-screen villainy. Both coteries are arguably avoidable, however, the state of play on the ground strikes a resoundingly dissonant chord touching a highly sensitive nerve.

A yet another set of conceptual metaphors is derived based on the above-mentioned building blocks:

SIMPLIFICATION IS AN ASSET AND A LIABILITY

CONTAGION IS A HYPOTHETICAL ENEMY

EXISTENTIAL TECHNOLOGY IS A PRESUMED CONTAGION

OVERCONSUMPTION IS A TENTATIVE DISEASE

DIS- AND MISINFORMATION ARE PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

OVERSHOOT IS AN ABUNDANCE

No matter the cost, humans are too adaptable for their own good. For better or worse, alarming as these findings in actual fact are, they are most unlikely to deter the end user, or more appropriately, end losers to course-correct in any significant fashion. From a developmental perspective, human adepts first adopt the concept of distinction and later that of similarity, but, despite this innate mechanism, they

gravitate to favouring similarity in terms of blurring the boundaries of good and its antithesis. Antithetical views lend themselves to a conducive setting almost exclusively with a view to clearing the immediate hurdles to self-encoded and religiously observed mores of convenience and epicurean satyrism. All saturnine affairs of the world are oft-discarded as a nuisance and a burdensome albatross around the neck of an otherwise happy commune. A callback to the morals and manners is once more necessary. Due to the adaptive armour against change, manners reshape and reconstitute what is desirable as opposed to the cancelled and ignored. This leads to the misconstrued deconstruction of conceptually metaphorical constructs that can be conveniently utilised as tools of elucidation and wilful manipulation and ignorant self-delusion.

It must be duly noted that the proposed metaphors in this subheading are not inclusive or emblematic of the authentic intent of the trap study researchers. They are a warped version of an alternative reality that can discursively become a personal nexus of beliefs, in fact, in a post-truth world, this is unfortunately a more probable corollary and outcome. The same contention obtains for the perception of what constitutes villainy and how that definition takes on multitudinous countenances and hues, and equally, why the traps, objectively taken, should be a call to action, but will largely remain intentionally unheard and successfully avoided. The detriment, on the other hand, for this undue negligence is too great to forecast and calculate.

### **3. A subliminal love of the villain against all odds with a few caveats**

Thinking of globally and instantly recognisable names in the arena of fictionalised archetypes of villainy, few names come as easily as that of Anakin Skywalker (brought to embodied form by the Canadian actor Hayden Christensen), better known by the moniker Darth Vader (see the official website of the Star Wars franchise as referenced in the source section for specifics and the background story). This paper, however, lends emphasis on the former, by and large disregarding the explicitly dark iteration of the character. This is done, in part, quite purposely, as this is a walk-in survey leading into a more encompassing research project in the succeeding phases.

Anakin's name became a household word since he had first appeared in the Star Wars film series back in 1977. His minatory appearance and menacing robotic-sounding voice instantly captured the imagination of the global public. In fairness and truth, audiences across the board overtly cheered on the Rebel Alliance and his offspring Luke and Princess Leia in their desperate pursuit to

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overthrow the evil Empire, dispense with the Emperor Palpatine and best Darth Vader himself. Nonetheless, neither Luke nor Leia, not even the evil incarnate of the Emperor permeated the hearts and minds of viewers all over the planet to such an extraordinary extent. This remains the case even in 2023 with Darth Vader, or more precisely, Anakin Skywalker, making more than one comeback, first in the prequel trilogy, and later in various so-called anthology films and limited TV shows. The most recent appearance of Anakin Skywalker in the Ashoka TV series sees him as a fully redeemed and up to a point resuscitated character who has come a long and arduous, yet, full circle, despite all odds and adversities. The fact that he was consummately wicked and the ultimate agent of malevolence who had an instrumentally indispensable first and foremost hand in committing unspeakable atrocities does not appear to detract from his newly found salvation.

For the sake of comparison, another book and film antagonist is held up as a genuine article of likeable villainy. A ruthless martinet with an almost Shakespearean name, Coriolanus Snow, from the Hunger Games book and film franchise (see the official website of the Hunger Games franchise as referenced in the source section for specifics and the background story). We first meet Snow as an elderly statesman with all the trappings of a blood-thirsty autocrat and limitless power to do as he wills. At first blush, no otherworldly appeal is perceived. Since the incipient, but paradoxically older version of the character is embodied by the ageing thespian and seasoned, incidentally Canadian, actor Donald Sutherland, the frenzied allure was patently absent. This changed with the prequel and a younger iteration of the character played by a relatively unknown, and needless to say much younger, British actor Tom Blyth.

Franchise	Star Wars	Hunger Games
Villains	Anakin Skywalker	Coriolanus Snow
orphan	+	+
vulnerable	+	+
male	+	+
white	+	+
downfall	+	+
powerful	+	+
strong	+/-	+/-
young	+	+/-
war criminals	+	+
redemption	+	-

If communicators truly vote with their feet, to resort to a well-thumbed idiom, this table is a plausible argument corroborating what their feet, or more accurately preferences dictate in terms of how these two characters are perceived. They were identified and selected by design and purposefully for the following reasons:

- They both share a similar, if not identical, background and origin story.
- At some point, they were in a position of despair, suffering and privation.
- The characters' creators went out of their way to underscore they had the potential for good.
- The creators also hammered and cemented the notion their success was contingent of other more powerful men.
- Both are young, or their younger variants are the focal point of the main narrative.
- They rose through the ranks due to smarts, looks, although this is not explicitly stated, and destiny. In the case of Skywalker, this point is the essence of who he is, the chosen one, and in Snow's, the adage "Snow lands on top" is reiterated frequently enough to root him in a fated glory to come.
- Curiously enough, or perhaps not quite, they are both white heterosexual men, which, again justifiably regrettably, appear a handy prerequisite for greatness.
- The only point of divergence is the lack of Snow's chance at redemption and ultimate demise, whereas Skywalker gets to go on ad infinitum.
- It bears repeating that both men are veritable war criminals and mass murderers.
- They go on to become extremely powerful and command haunting strength and sway over their respective fictional worlds.

To all intents and purposes, Skywalker and Snow are identical and borderline indistinguishable. The bizarre appeal they exude and inspire is tightly-knit with the already discussed multi-layered human cognitive apparatus and at the very least dyadic nature of cognition. As previously stated, communicators exhibit multiple personae through which social interactions are made possible in contextually specific settings. The shadow self craves sustenance and this partially accounts for the subliminal love of and for the prototypical villain. It should be noted that the social media video-sharing platform TikTok was used to monitor and gather germane data for the substantiation of the discussion and elaboration; 40 TikTok videos in total were archived and analysed as a type of real-life corpus and empirical corroboration.



#### 4. In lieu of concluding remarks: a stab in the conceptual dark

A noteworthy finding is simultaneously disheartening and curiously inspiring. It does not pertain to the revelations that linguistic adepts root for villains; the saddening realisation echoes in the fact that they happen to be rooted in heteronormative, racially “acceptable” and gender and sex-specific categories. The prototypical villain is hard to come by if these criteria are not met. Parasocial relationships and empathy are effortlessly construed by means of conceptual metaphors and more overarching cognitive and psycholinguistic apparatuses and methods of inquiry. The destructive aspect is not found in the shadow self, but rather in the fossilised categorial binarisation. This is where the genuine well-being decoupling and care for the fellow human being find themselves at their most vulnerable and when this breaking point is reached the metaphorical veneer is not only in danger of cracking, but completely shattering to smithereens.

In a post-truth world, parasocial and mediated modalities of human interaction, it is more significant than ever to keep our complex conceptual systems pliable and adaptable to potential threats, be it the fourteen traps, or the simple poverty of the light side, for a dab of darkness may be good and healthy, the multiverse of it is incontrovertibly ominous and undeniably dangerous. Anakin may be the factitious chosen one, and Snow may land on top, but until they are more than the sum of the constituent hallmarks, perhaps, that is indeed their true and by far the most depraved villainy.

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## KONCEPTUALNO GRAĐENJE POZITIVNIH METANARATIVA O ANTAGONISTIMA: SLUČAJ ANAKINA SKYWALKERA I CORIOLANUSA SNOWA

### *Rezime*

Multimodalni konceptualni sistemi koji su u neprestanom kognitivnom plesu stvaranja raznorodnih scenarija po kojima oblikujemo stvarnost predstavljaju svojevrsni most u više slojeve kognicije i jezika. Težište u radu jeste na teoriji pojmovnih metafora, promišljanju o posebnostima popularnih antagonista u dva serijala knjiga i filmova, čiji je obuhvat na globalnom nivou prepoznatljivosti i uticaja u domenu popularne kulture izrazito visok i neizostavno uočljiv. Dio istraživanja odnosi se i na četrnaest identifikovanih prijetnji evolucijskom razvoju čovječanstva. Ova tematska trijada nalazi se u sinergijskom odnosu empirije i teorije. Ovaj istraživački projekat predstavlja interdisciplinarni, ali u prvom redu lingvistički osvrt na odabranu građu i tematski okvir iz navedenih izvora.

► *Ključne riječi*: konceptualni sistemi, multimodalnost, kognicija, jezik, posebnosti antagonista, četrnaest prijetnji, popularna kultura.

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