A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Conversational Techniques in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract: This paper reveals the mechanisms of characterization in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) through a sociolinguistic analysis of conversational techniques in the novel's dialogue. I analyze characters' direct speech for linguistic hypercorrection, gendered speech patterns, and indications of power or powerlessness. In doing so, I aim to reveal the significance of Fitzgerald's relatively sparse dialogue in shaping our perceptions of the novel's characters.

Although dialogue in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) seems to feature less prominently than Nick Carraway's descriptive narration, it is through characters' conversational techniques that Fitzgerald reveals some of the most important information in the novel. Specifically, Fitzgerald uses dialogue to define his characters in relation to their socioeconomic status, gender, and power or powerlessness. Gatsby's speech in the novel is over-formal to the point of absurdity, a habit that linguists call hypercorrection. Fitzgerald's dialogue also emphasizes gender differences among his characters through overtly gendered speech patterns. Lastly, through conversational techniques such as interruptions, Fitzgerald conveys the power relations and relative aggressiveness of his characters. Thus, through a sociolinguistic analysis of conversational techniques in the novel, we can more fully appreciate the significance of Fitzgerald's relatively sparse dialogue in shaping our perceptions of the novel's characters.

As early as the 1920s, researchers have considered how the ways in which people speak reveal important informa-

tion about the speaker. An early pioneer of this research was Otto Jespersen, who published *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* in 1922. Although it is unlikely that Fitzgerald read this work, as it was known mostly in academic circles, Fitzgerald uses dialogue in *The Great Gatsby* to subtly reveal information about his characters in ways that correspond to linguists' understandings of conversational techniques. Indeed, Fitzgerald's work has long been appreciated by non-linguists for its brilliant use of language. For example, in his non-linguistic study *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo* (1993), Arnold Weinstein states that a key aspect of Fitzgerald's writing in *The Great Gatsby* is "the pivotal role of language as instrument of assertion" (131). Nevertheless, sociolinguistic works published since the mid-twentieth century, such as Jack Chambers's *Sociolinguistic Theory* (1995), Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1973), Gerard Van Herk's *What is Sociolinguistics?* (2012), and Deborah Tannen's *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (1993), can be excellent resources for providing a vocabulary to discuss Fitzgerald's dialogue.

To begin, we can identify in Gatsby's dialogue a tendency toward what linguists call hypercorrection. Chambers explains that "the upwardly mobile are overzealous in their attempts at adopting a sociolect that is not native to them" (64). Similarly, the nouveau-riche Gatsby overdoes what he thinks are the linguistic requirements of upper-class people, using excessively formal language and adding the phrase "old sport" when addressing other men. According to Nick, this "elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd" (46). Moreover, Gatsby's hypercorrection unravels in moments of panic, such as when Nick and Gatsby discuss the state of Nick's house and whether everything is in perfect order for Daisy's visit, when she will meet Gatsby for the first time in years. Gatsby uses a short sentence without a subject ("Looks very good" [72]) and stutters, "the shape of—of tea" (72). He also exclaims, "'Of course, of course! They're fine!' and adds hollowly, '… old sport'" (72). The affectionate name that Gatsby uses to seem well-born falls by

the wayside in his moment of panic but is then added in an attempt to revert to his hypercorrect speech. Gatsby's composure is starting to unravel here, revealing that the manner in which he normally speaks is not as natural to him as he would like other people to believe.

Fitzgerald's dialogue also emphasizes gender differences through overtly gendered speech patterns. Since Jespersen published *Language* in 1922, with a chapter entitled "The Woman," extensive study has been conducted regarding the specifics of men's and women's speech habits. One of the most well-known works on the subject is Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place*, which posits that women's language is characterized by hedges, fillers, tag questions, rising intonation even in non-question sentences, "empty" adjectives, precise colour terms, intensifiers such as *so*, increased use of standard language forms, super-polite forms, avoidance of strong swear words, and avoidance of interruptions. Lakoff characterizes "empty" adjectives as those that are used when expressing emotions, which are certainly a feature of women's speech that Fitzgerald represents. Early in the novel, Daisy utters the phrase "How gorgeous!" (17) to express her happiness when Nick tells her how much people from back home miss her. Myrtle's downstairs neighbour Mrs. McKee, when expressing her fondness for Myrtle's dress, says, "I think it's adorable" (33). Even Myrtle herself, when admiring her new dog, says that it's "cute" (30). The women in the novel also make use of tag questions. Describing Nick, Daisy says, "You remind me of a—of a rose, an absolute rose. Doesn't he?" (21), and when talking to Tom she says, "It's romantic, isn't it, Tom?" (22). Jordan Baker also uses a tag question when she says, "She might have the decency not to telephone him at dinner time. Don't you think?" (21). The questions at the ends of these utterances do not really serve much function, as the speaker has already declared her opinion. According to Lakoff, women also use more intensifiers, words that modify adjectives and verbs. Daisy states that "Tom's getting very profound" (20) and, when talking about her own life, says that she's "had a very bad time" (22). The last major feature of women's speech that

Fitzgerald represents is the use of fillers. For example, when Myrtle discusses whom she wants to invite to her party, she says that she wants to invite the McKees, "and, of course, I got to call up my sister, too" (31), interjecting an irrelevant phrase in the middle of her statement.

Fizgerald's dialogue also anticipates the work of linguist Deborah Tannen. As Van Herk explains, "Tannen claims that women are more likely to use language to build and maintain relationships (a rapport style), while men are more likely to use language to communicate factual information (a report style)" (89). In *The Great Gatsby*, the differences between rapport style and report style are very evident. From the above examples of women's speech, we can see that the women in Fitzgerald's novel tend to express emotive information, as opposed to facts. By contrast, the men in the novel focus a great deal on expressing facts in a report style of speaking. For example, when Tom is talking about his house, he says that he's "got a nice place here" (15), stating it as a fact. Discussing a book that he read, Tom states that "it's all scientific stuff" (20). When asked about his horseback-ride Tom tells Gatsby that there are "very good roads around here" (85). Later in the same conversation, Gatsby tells Tom that they met "two weeks ago" (85), giving Tom an exact date. Lastly, Tom replies to this with, "that's right. You were with Nick here" (85). All these utterances convey facts known to the speaker, not emotional states. The men are more concerned with saying things as they are, as opposed to the women in the book, who speak to express their feelings and strengthen their relationships—just as Tannen finds men and women do in real life.

Finally, linguistic theories of gendered speech patterns recall Fitzgerald's use of interruptions and other indications of power. In "Women, Men, and Interruptions: A Critical Review," which appears in Tannen's *Gender and Conversational Interaction* (1993), Deborah James and Sandra Clarke write that "females may use interruptions of the cooperative and rapport-building type to a greater extent than males do" (268). This means that when women talk to each other, interruptions do not necessarily mean they are being rude;

rather, they use interruptions to build solidarity among one another. Fitzgerald represents this conversational technique early on in his novel to show the friendship between Daisy and Jordan: Daisy, discussing her butler polishing silverware, says that "He had to polish it from morning till night, until finally it began to affect his nose—" (20); Jordan chimes in that "Things went from bad to worse" (21); and Daisy finishes her story with, "Yes. Things went from bad to worse, until finally he had to give up his position" (21). The interruption in this story is not negative, and Daisy does not seem offended by Jordan helping her tell the story simultaneously.

Conversely, Fitzgerald uses interruption among the men in the novel to indicate aggressiveness, competition, and power. While at Myrtle and Tom's apartment, Mr. and Mrs. McKee have a conversation that starts with Mrs. McKee saying, "I wouldn't think of changing the light…. I think it's—" (33), and her husband interrupts with a "*Sh!*" (33) that goes unquestioned, indicating Mr. McKee's power over his wife. Several times in the novel, Tom and Gatsby come head to head, not just for Daisy's affections, but to try to hold power over one another. In an interaction between the two men, Gatsby starts to say to Tom, "I suppose the automobiles—" (85) and is cut off by Tom with an abrupt "Yeah" (85). In this dialogue, Tom is asserting his dominance over Gatsby by interrupting him, a sharp contrast to the way that Daisy and Jordan used interruptions in their conversation. In a later conversation with Daisy, Tom also interrupts her when she is saying to Gatsby, "you know the advertisement of the man—" (97) with a quick "All right" (97). Tom is constantly using interruptions as a form of power and control, and in the conversational examples shown above, his utterances are always very short and abrupt. He also tends to shout in order to get his way and make sure he is followed, such as when he orders everyone to get on to town with a hostile "Come on!… What's the matter anyhow?" (98). Through Tom's speech patterns, Fitzgerald reveals Tom's aggressiveness and that Tom is constantly trying to assert dominance over others.

I will conclude by analyzing how Fitzgerald uses the direct speech of Daisy and Myrtle to contrast the two women in relation to their socioeconomic status, femininity, and power. Myrtle reveals through her incorrect verb usage that she is of a lower socioeconomic background than Daisy, saying, "I don't suppose you got that kind" (30) when asking a salesman about dogs, and "I got to call up my sister" (31). As we can see, Myrtle also has a much more imperative—and therefore more masculine—way of speaking, saying what she means directly and assertively. Finally, as we see in the paragraph above, Daisy is passive, and Tom's interruptions show the power that he has in their conversations. Myrtle, however, despite being a less cultured and a simpler person, is not overrun by Tom in conversation. Thus, in the contrasting figures of Daisy and Myrtle, Fitzgerald holds in tension the conversational techniques that define all the major characters in his novel. As I have shown, works such as Jack Chambers's *Sociolinguistic Theory*, Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place*, Gerard Van Herk's *What is Sociolinguistics?*, and Deborah Tannen's *Gender and Conversational Interaction* can provide readers of *The Great Gatsby* with a sociolinguistic vocabulary to identify these conversational techniques, so that we can more fully appreciate how Fitzgerald's dialogue shapes our perceptions of his characters.

Works Cited

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