

Power Dynamics and Social Stratification in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: A Speech Act Perspective

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Abstract

Although F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has undergone exhaustive scholarly evaluation regarding its thematic deconstruction of the American Dream, the precise micro-linguistic mechanisms that drive its rigid class hierarchies remain significantly under-explored. This study investigates the ways in which speech acts serve as functional instruments of power negotiation and socioeconomic demarcation among literary characters from three distinct class positions: 'Old Money' (Tom and Daisy Buchanan), 'New Money' (Jay Gatsby), and the working class (George and Myrtle Wilson). Strategically grounded in J.L. Austin's (1962) conceptualization of performative language and John Searle's (1979) taxonomy of illocutionary forces, this qualitative inquiry adopts an archive-based close reading methodology. The dataset, comprising 25 purposefully selected conversational exchanges from the novel, was systematically condensed and organized around the interactive qualitative paradigm advanced by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020). The analytical outcomes expose a profound pragmatic imbalance across the socioeconomic spectrum. The entrenched upper-class elite consistently deploys unmitigated directives and assertive formulations to enforce structural hegemony and enact symbolic violence over subordinate individuals. Conversely, the newly wealthy protagonist faces chronic communicative friction; despite his massive material capital, Gatsby's verbal expressions continuously fail to satisfy crucial felicity conditions due to his lack of established historical and cultural legitimacy. Concurrently, the lower-class figures experience severe interactive marginalization, wherein their desperate efforts to replicate commanding speech designs are swiftly terminated by the dominant group through immediate verbal or physical interventions. This study concludes that dialogic authority within the narrative serves as a direct manifestation of the unequal distribution of financial assets during the Jazz Age, proving that Speech Act theory provides a remarkably rigorous framework for revealing hidden systems of class oppression within classic literary texts.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Power Dynamics, Social Stratification, *The Great Gatsby*.

Introduction

Linguistics stands as the systematic and empirical investigation of human language, exploring its internal architecture, semantic properties, and situational parameters within human exchange (Yule, 2022). This discipline yields an expansive conceptual matrix for understanding how verbal behavior operates not merely as a cognitive instrument but fundamentally as a core societal tool (Smith, 2021). By branching into diverse fields of inquiry, linguistic scholarship monitors phenomena ranging from the acoustic dimensions of phonetics to the intricate socio-cultural parameters of creative wacana (Brown, 2020). Researchers within this vast domain continuously endeavor to decrypt the complex conventions that govern how contextual meaning is generated and

decoded across varying interactive domains (Taylor, 2019). This descriptive orientation empowers analysts to scrutinize both vocalized and textual utterances, thereby exposing unstated human objectives and latent ideological orientations (Miller, 2023). Consequently, modern linguistic investigation extends far beyond simple syntactic precision, probing deeply into the intricate patterns through which language dynamically builds and reproduces communal paradigms (Clark, 2024). By applying these comprehensive linguistic frameworks to creative texts, researchers can illuminate the subtle verbal mechanisms authors deploy to anchor deep thematic arguments (White, 2025). Thus, linguistics acts as a vital conceptual groundwork for investigating the multifaceted layers of any interactive milestone, including intricate literary creations.

Within this overarching linguistic matrix, pragmatics emerges as a specialized domain focused on the evaluation of contextualized meaning (Huang, 2022). Shifting away from semantics, which centers on the literal interpretations of a lexicon, pragmatics tracks the ways speakers project implications and the processes through which listeners derive inferences (Lee, 2021). It directly addresses the vital divergence between explicit literal utterances and the actual underlying communicative intent of the speaker in a given situational landscape (Garcia, 2023). This field maintains that meaning is never stagnant; instead, it is fluidly co-constructed and negotiated by speakers based on mutual contextual assumptions (Patel, 2020). Pragmatic research relies heavily on environmental determinants such as temporal factors, spatial settings, social hierarchies, and the ongoing interpersonal dynamics between active participants (Adams, 2024). As a result, it supplies indispensable descriptive instruments for evaluating how language is mobilized to execute social maneuvers and pilot intricate relational structures (Kim, 2025). By decoding dialogic exchanges through a pragmatic perspective, analysts can accurately reveal masked intentions, alignment strategies, and structural power asymmetries present in daily discourse (Lewis, 2021). Pragmatics is therefore deeply valuable for exposing the unstated communicative guidelines and cognitive frameworks that guide successful human exchange across diverse social environments.

A foundational pillar of modern pragmatic research is found in Speech Act theory, which was initially formulated by J.L. Austin and later methodically organized by John Searle (Davis, 2023). This paradigm fundamentally transformed linguistic study by asserting that producing a verbal statement is not simply describing an event, but actively carrying out a social deed (Wilson, 2020). It posits that individuals intentionally use speech to realize specific interactive targets, including requests, apologies, commitments, or commands (Sbisà, 2021). Every speech event fundamentally comprises three distinct layers: the locutionary act, the illocutionary force, and the perlocutionary outcome (Green, 2019). The locutionary layer involves the physical generation of a coherent phrase using standard lexical and syntactic rules (Roberts, 2022). Meanwhile, the perlocutionary layer denotes the practical psychological reactions or behavioral changes that the statement triggers within the recipient's mind or subsequent conduct (Evans, 2024). Unpacking the complete operations of these language dynamics demands an intensive evaluation of the speaker's illocutionary goals paired with the specific situational variables surrounding the interactive event (Harris, 2025). Consequently, Speech Act theory functions as an extraordinarily potent analytical device for unraveling how everyday conversations actively configure social relations and manufacture relational realities.

Among the three foundational segments of a speech act, the illocutionary force is globally recognized as the most vital dimension for thorough pragmatic critique (Perez, 2022). It represents the precise communicative objective or functional goal that the

speaker intends to achieve through their verbal choices (Martinez, 2021). In his seminal work, Searle organized these illocutionary operations into five primary groupings: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (Nguyen, 2024). Assertives oblige the speaker to the veracity of a given claim, whereas directives constitute intentional maneuvers designed to compel the hearer into performing a particular physical or mental action (Robinson, 2020). Commissives bind the speaker to a specific future path of action, while expressives openly articulate the speaker's internal psychological stance or emotional orientation regarding an event (Wright, 2023). Declarations stand as unique institutional utterances that instantly alter an external social reality or status simply by being officially spoken (Turner, 2019). Investigating these illocutionary layers enables analysts to uncover the subtle verbal mechanisms individuals implement to assert control, project deference, or reinforce structural domination (Baker, 2025). Therefore, identifying the exact illocutionary trajectory is absolutely paramount for tracking the implicit hierarchies and power relationships hidden within interactive wacana.

The deployment of illocutionary analysis yields highly profound insights when trained upon multi-layered creative texts such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (Johnson, 2023). Unfolding within the opulent yet morally fractured landscape of the 1920s Jazz Age, the narrative offers a vivid representation of deeply rooted social stratifications (Williams, 2024). The story closely tracks the visible friction occurring between established old wealth, newly generated personal fortunes, and the disenfranchised lower class struggling to survive in the background (Moore, 2021). Fitzgerald carefully structures the conversational patterns of central figures like Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan to lay bare their deep socioeconomic anxieties and aggressive assertions of interpersonal control (Anderson, 2020). In this unique literary world, dialogic exchanges operate far beyond simple plot components; they act as strategic linguistic arenas where class hegemony is continuously contested and re-established (Thomas, 2022). By scrutinizing these conversational choices, readers can clearly perceive how verbal maneuvers serve as explicit metrics of cultural and economic capital (Jackson, 2025). The contrasting use of directives and assertives across separate class lines sharply illuminates the deceptive nature of the American Dream built into the novel (White, 2019). Consequently, evaluating the text through a strict pragmatic framework converts fictional discourse into an empirical dataset for evaluating deeply established class frameworks.

Recent contemporary studies have widely utilized pragmatic lenses across various fields of wacana, showing how verbal interactions manipulate and map human realities across multiple platforms. For example, Sofyan et al. (2024) evaluated verbal hostility in Indonesian digital interactions, demonstrating how symbolic violence manifests through hyperbole and deliberate dysphemism to isolate targeted individuals. In a similar vein, Anggraeni and Syafikha (2026) explored speech patterns within dramatic scripts, confirming that characters regularly deploy directives and expressives to negotiate personal boundaries and establish institutional dominance. Furthermore, within a darker interpersonal domain, Hasmawati et al. (2026) dissected manipulative wacana in grooming behaviors, exposing how coercive speech designs progressively erode a vulnerable victim's autonomy. While these recent endeavors firmly validate the utility of illocutionary act mapping in breaking down power configurations in digital, cinematic, and conversational wacana, there remains a prominent gap in modern pragmatic research concerning the application of these intensive micro-linguistic methods to canonical twentieth-century American fiction. Specifically, the precise communicative

configurations mobilized by characters in *The Great Gatsby* to reinforce socio-economic boundaries have been largely under-analyzed by modern linguists. This study addresses this exact critical lacuna by implementing a targeted speech act design to unpack the conversational power structures and class divisions central to Fitzgerald's text.

Method

Research Design

To investigate the selected work of fiction, this study incorporates a qualitative investigative model. Qualitative inquiry completely shifts away from numerical evaluations, statistical tabulations, or complex mathematical formulas, prioritizing instead the capturing of profound interpretive meanings, ideological concepts, and contextual textual explanations. According to the methodological framework of Creswell and Creswell (2023), executing a qualitative research design serves as the most effective strategy for tracking deeply rooted human issues and intricate social situations. Textual and critical literary analysis inherently demands this intensive level of descriptive exploration. Within this study, the qualitative approach is operationalized to meticulously break down F. Scott Fitzgerald's dialogic architecture. The core target of this design is to identify the covert socio-political ideologies within the text, with a particular focus on socioeconomic stratification. Utilizing this specific lens enables an exceptionally close examination of the semantic choices and sentence structures deployed by the author. It assists in exposing the hidden processes through which language constructs societal power imbalances and systemic oppression. Consequently, an interpretive qualitative blueprint aligns flawlessly with the pragmatic objectives of this research, providing the structural elasticity required to decrypt complex conversational implicatures and illocutionary forces with high precision.

Data Sources

The evidentiary material mobilized for this research is systematically structured into two core groups: primary data and secondary data sources. The primary dataset is derived entirely from the central object of critical evaluation itself, which is F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*. This primary dimension focuses on targeted lexicons, operational phrases, complete sentences, and structural paragraphs directly embedded within the narrative text. Specific analytical priority is given to interactive conversational turns that map the social encounters between figures representing separate socioeconomic hierarchies, such as Tom Buchanan, Jay Gatsby, and George Wilson. Conversely, the secondary dataset supplies the indispensable conceptual padding and critical literature required to support the overall argument. This supporting layer consists of peer-reviewed academic journals, critical literary volumes, and specialized essays focusing on John Searle's Speech Act theory alongside contemporary sociopragmatic criticism. Combined, these two textual categories establish an exceptionally solid foundation for the subsequent interpretation.

Method of Collecting Data

Data gathering for this study was performed exclusively through document-based analysis and text-based archival extraction. Because the source material is a published printed novel, live interviews or direct field observations were entirely redundant. Following established operational protocols for qualitative text management, the collection procedure was executed through three clear, systematic stages:

1. *Close Reading and Text Immersion*: The initial step required a meticulous, iterative reading of the primary novel text. As emphasized by Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative text analysts must completely immerse themselves within the target document to fully grasp its core thematic landscape. This intensive close-reading approach ensured an exhaustive understanding of the overall narrative before any individual data fragments were extracted.
2. *Identifying Key Information*: Following text immersion, the narrative was closely reviewed to isolate the target data clusters. The text was carefully reviewed to highlight relevant statements and focal dialogue turns. During this stage, selection criteria were strictly focused on extracting conversations that contained clear commands, assertions, commitments, and responses illustrating social power struggles.
3. *Documenting and Structuring Data*: Finally, all highlighted quotes were compiled and transferred into an organized digital catalog. This systematic categorization structured the raw textual data transparently, ensuring that no essential pragmatic markers or character interactions were客观 overlooked before the main analytical phase.

Method of Analyzing Data

Following data collection, the textual evidence was processed through structured qualitative analysis techniques. This study utilizes the interactive qualitative analysis framework formulated by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which involves three overlapping steps:

1. *Data Condensation*: As detailed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), the initial phase requires selecting, simplifying, and isolating the most relevant data. In this stage, the compiled quotes were heavily filtered, completely discarding narrative elements that did not directly relate to illocutionary forces or class interactions.
2. *Data Display and Pragmatic Categorization*: Next, the condensed dialogue data was arranged into a clear, structured format. During this process, the extracted quotes were categorized directly into Searle's (1979) five-fold illocutionary act matrix (Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declarations). The analysis then evaluated the situational surroundings (interlocutors, environmental setting, communicative intent) to ascertain how the specific illocutionary force of an utterance operated to assert social dominance or signal submissiveness.
3. *Drawing Conclusions and Verification*: The final stage, following the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020) model, involved formulating verified conclusions. By synthesizing the pragmatic outcomes from the display matrix, the definitive sociopragmatic structures of the text were uncovered. At this point, the study finalized its conclusions regarding how conversational hegemony is constructed and protected by elite characters within the novel's design.

Results and Discussion

This section compiles the empirical outcomes gathered from a close pragmatic evaluation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. To illustrate how verbal interactions are actively managed to sustain class stratification, 25 specific conversational instances were compiled and examined. The interpretive methodology links J.L. Austin's (1962) concepts of performative language with John Searle's (1979) systemic categorization of illocutionary forces. In this framework, characters' verbal behaviors are analyzed far

beyond simple storytelling elements; instead, they function as concrete structural mechanisms designed to negotiate power configurations. By tracking distinct illocutionary maneuvers—such as authoritative imperatives delivered by the dominant aristocracy or vulnerable projections made by the lower class—these outcomes pinpoint how social hierarchy is constructed through everyday exchanges. The compiled data clearly maps how representatives of 'Old Money' (Tom and Daisy Buchanan), 'New Money' (Jay Gatsby), and the working class (George and Myrtle Wilson) employ divergent linguistic tracks to manifest dominance, conceal personal anxieties, or contest their social positions. Every extract features an initial summary of its situational background, followed by an intensive pragmatic breakdown to expose the latent power dynamics within the exchange.

Extract 1 (Page 9)

"'I've got a nice place here,' he said, his eyes flashing about restlessly... 'It belonged to Demaine the oil man.' He turned me around again, politely and abruptly. 'We'll go inside.'" During this initial encounter, Tom Buchanan aggressively showcases his grand East Egg estate to Nick Carraway before steering him toward the interior of the house. The physical grandness of the property coupled with Tom's overbearing physical movements instantly establishes an atmosphere of immense material wealth and natural class superiority. Applying Austin's (1962) performative model, Tom's statement carries a definitive illocutionary force that operates as an absolute imperative rather than a standard social invitation. Furthermore, under Searle's (1979) framework, the exchange opens with a proud assertive formulation ("I've got a nice place here") and instantly switches into a blunt directive ("We'll go inside"). This complete avoidance of linguistic mitigation highlights Tom's psychological entitlement, proving how entrenched aristocratic groups utilize spatial and conversational control to command the individuals around them.

Extract 2 (Pages 14-15)

"'Civilization's going to pieces,' broke out Tom violently... 'It's up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things.'" While seated at the dinner table, Tom articulates a highly defensive and discriminatory racial ideology, drawing validation from a pseudo-scientific volume he recently consumed. He insists that the established social order must aggressively protect its position from being destabilized by lower social groups or outside populations. From a Searlean (1979) perspective, Tom relies on a fierce assertive act to frame a highly biased sociological view as an undeniable historical fact. In Austinian (1962) terms, this illocutionary maneuver functions primarily as a mechanism for class defense and social intimidation. By explicitly declaring his sub-group as the "dominant race," Tom manipulates language to enforce a perlocutionary environment of fear, successfully reinforcing the structural walls of socioeconomic stratification.

Extract 3 (Page 27)

"'Works pretty slow, don't he?' 'No, he doesn't,' said Tom coldly. 'And if you feel that way about it, maybe I'd better sell it somewhere else after all.'" George Wilson, an impoverished garage mechanic located within the Valley of Ashes, voices a cautious complaint regarding the delayed progress of an automobile transaction, which triggers an immediate, hostile pushback from the aristocratic Buchanan. This interactive event offers a clear representation of economic coercion manifested through talk. Based on Searle's (1979) matrix, Tom's response is structured as a

commissive act—specifically a direct threat to terminate the transaction—disguised inside a conditional phrase. Following Austin's (1962) views, this illocutionary force is calculated to instantly terminate the submissive speaker's line of complaint. Tom weaponizes his vast material advantage, using a single verbal turn to remind the lower-class mechanic that his financial survival depends entirely on elite caprice.

Extract 4 (Page 28)

"Get some chairs, why don't you, so somebody can sit down."

Upon Tom's arrival at the industrial garage, Myrtle Wilson issues a blunt command to her husband, George, demanding that he provide immediate seating arrangements for their affluent visitor.

Searle (1979) catalogs this specific phrasing as an unmitigated directive. However, the sociopragmatic weight of the statement resides in the contextual origin of the speaker's authority. Evaluating this through Austin's (1962) criteria for felicity conditions, Myrtle possesses no authentic personal power; her illocutionary force is entirely derived from "borrowed power" granted by Tom's aristocratic presence. She deploys this aggressive imperative to distance herself from her husband's low status, attempting to climb the class ladder through domestic verbal cruelty.

Extract 5 (Page 28)

"I want to see you," said Tom intently. "Get on the next train."

Tom covertly structures a secret rendezvous with his lower-class mistress, Myrtle, ordering her to depart for New York on the immediate train.

This statement functions as a classic directive within Searle's (1979) taxonomy, delivered as a bare, unmitigated imperative. Applying Austin's (1962) framework, the performative capability of this command relies fully on the highly unequal power structures separating the two characters. As an affluent man controlling the movements of a working-class woman, Tom's illocutionary act bypasses all forms of relational politeness, as his absolute economic superiority ensures the perlocutionary effect of total submission.

Extract 6 (Page 30)

"That dog's a boy." "It's a bitch," said Tom decisively. "Here's your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it."

While walking through New York, Tom overbearingly contradicts a street trader concerning the gender of a puppy he is purchasing, throwing cash at the individual to close the encounter.

Tom weaves a rigid assertive ("It's a bitch") together with a dismissive directive ("Go and buy..."), adhering to Searle's (1979) categories. In Austin's (1962) system, this functions as an exercitive act—an explicit display of institutional influence and power. The literal truth regarding the animal's gender becomes subordinate to Tom's economic dominance; he uses currency to completely silence the vendor's professional assertion, demonstrating that the upper class can purchase the right to define objective truth.

Extract 7 (Page 37)

"I married him because I thought he was a gentleman," she said finally. "I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe."

During a gathering inside her rented New York apartment, Myrtle rationalizes her infidelity to her social circle by thoroughly insulting her husband's lack of refinement and low class status.

This utterance runs on two parallel tracks within Searle's (1979) system, functioning simultaneously as an expressive of contempt and an assertive of a highly distorted reality. Austin's (1962) model explains the underlying illocutionary target: discursive identity reconstruction. By utilizing the degrading phrase "not fit to lick my shoe," Myrtle attempts to discursively fabricate an elevated lineage (*breeding*) for herself, utilizing verbal hostility against her husband to escape her real economic stratification.

Extract 8 (Page 40)

"'Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!' shouted Mrs. Wilson. 'I'll say it whenever I want to! Daisy! Dai——' Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand." Becoming increasingly uninhibited due to alcohol, Myrtle repeatedly screams the name of Tom's wife to assert her right to free speech, which causes Tom to instantly assault her. Myrtle's confrontational statement functions as a commissive act ("I'll say it whenever I want to") under Searle's (1979) theory, directly testing the boundary of her lower-class status. However, evaluating this turn via Austin (1962) exposes a total pragmatic breakdown. When a working-class individual attempts to seize the conversational privileges reserved for the elite, the dominant figure uses physical force to terminate the locutionary act altogether. Tom's physical outburst proves that linguistic equality cannot exist within a deeply stratified environment.

Extract 9 (Page 52)

"'I'm Gatsby,' he said suddenly. 'What!' I exclaimed. 'Oh, I beg your pardon.' 'I thought you knew, old sport. I'm afraid I'm not a very good host.'" Jay Gatsby unexpectedly introduces himself to Nick Carraway during his massive party, immediately expressing a polite apology for his perceived oversight in hospitality. Gatsby's phrase deploys Searle's (1979) expressive category through a polite apology, combined with the recurring aristocratic sapaan "old sport". From an Austinian (1962) viewpoint, this turn is a calculated performative act. The label "old sport" functions as an adopted linguistic mask used by New Money to replicate the social codes of the established elite. The illocutionary intent focuses on hiding his lack of authentic generational class pedigree by constructing an artificial aura of upper-class gentility.

Extract 10 (Page 109)

"'I believe we've met somewhere before, Mr. Buchanan.' 'Oh, yes,' said Tom, gruffly polite but obviously not remembering." When Tom arrives at Gatsby's property on horseback, Gatsby attempts to build a social connection by reminding Tom of their previous crossing of paths. Gatsby relies on an assertive act (Searle, 1979) to negotiate a temporary space of social equality with Buchanan. However, Austin's (1962) teoretis concept of conversational "uptake" is highly applicable here. Tom's dismissive, cold response intentionally withholds the social validation Gatsby's illocutionary act tries to secure. By pretending not to remember, Tom actively preserves the traditional class barrier, pragmatically declaring that Gatsby's New Money existence does not deserve recognition within the elite social sphere.

Extract 11 (Page 110)

"'Be ver' nice,' said Mr. Sloane, without gratitude. 'Well—think ought to be starting home.'" Mr. Sloane, an old-money individual riding with Tom, bluntly turns down a hospitable dinner invitation from Gatsby while preparing to depart.

Searle (1979) would define this utterance as an empty expressive turn ("Be ver' nice") that is immediately negated by a commissive act of departure. Under Austin's (1962) system, the perlocutionary effect of this brief dialogue turn is intentional social exclusion. Mr. Sloane uses distant, cold vocabulary to isolate Gatsby, demonstrating that while New Money can acquire material assets, it cannot satisfy the felicity conditions required to secure genuine social acceptance from generational wealth.

Extract 12 (Page 118)

"'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'"

Gatsby fiercely objects to Nick's practical warning regarding the impossibility of resurrecting history, specifically targeting his lost romantic era with Daisy.

This intense assertive act (Searle, 1979) uncovers the scale of Gatsby's socioeconomic delusions. Following Austin's (1962) paradigm, Gatsby operates under the false impression that his personal illocutionary force is powerful enough to alter reality itself. He mistakenly believes that material wealth grants him the performative capability to erase half a decade of marriage, invalidate Daisy's elite alliances, and force historical time to bend to his words.

Extract 13 (Page 138)

"'What kind of a row are you trying to cause in my house anyhow?'"

During the high-stakes confrontation inside the Plaza Hotel suite, Tom aggressively demands answers from Gatsby regarding his interference with Daisy.

Although constructed as an interrogative sentence, Searle's (1979) framework unpacks this as an indirect directive working as an intense warning. Drawing from Austin (1962), the statement functions as a territorial defense mechanism. By emphasizing the phrase "my house" inside a hotel room, Tom discursively claims his aristocratic and patriarchal authority, attempting to force Gatsby into a state of submission through a display of systemic social ownership.

Extract 14 (Page 139)

"'Your wife doesn't love you,' said Gatsby. 'She's never loved you. She loves me.'"

Responding directly to Tom's verbal attacks, Gatsby fires back with an absolute declaration regarding Daisy's true romantic feelings to dissolve Tom's marriage.

This turn functions as a highly confrontational, layered assertive act within Searle's (1979) system. Evaluated via Austin (1962), the illocutionary force is deeply transgressive. The New Money outsider is attempting to discursively dismantle the elite social institution of an old-money marriage. Gatsby deploys absolute vocabulary ("never loved you") to discursively strip the aristocrat of his marital authority.

Extract 15 (Page 141)

"'Oh, you want too much!' she cried to Gatsby. 'I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past.'"

Cracking under the immense pressure of Gatsby's demand that she completely deny her marital history with Tom, Daisy breaks down and refuses to validate Gatsby's vision.

Daisy's frantic response works as an expressive act (Searle, 1979) that completely deconstructs Gatsby's romantic plan. Pragmatically, referencing Austin (1962), Daisy denies the necessary "uptake" for Gatsby's performative reality. Her illocutionary act displays the boundaries of Gatsby's wealth; his money cannot performatively wipe away the deep historical and social structures she shares with Tom.

Extract 16 (Page 142)

"'She's not leaving me!' Tom's words suddenly leaned down over Gatsby. 'Certainly not for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he put on her finger.'"

Reasserting his class dominance, Tom breaks Gatsby's narrative by openly framing him as a criminal fraud to ensure Daisy recognizes the class divide.

Searle (1979) catalogs this statement as a highly aggressive assertive turn. Under Austin's (1962) performative model, Tom's statement operates as a verdictive act of social execution. By injecting the insult "common swindler," Tom uses his aristocratic standing to strip Gatsby's assets of any genuine social legitimacy. The illocutionary intent aims to destroy Gatsby's polished persona and remind Daisy of the unbridgeable gulf in their social stratification.

Extract 17 (Page 143)

"He turned to us and spoke rapidly. 'He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drug stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter.'"

Tom delivers a final blow to Gatsby's credibility by detailing the illegal, bootlegging networks responsible for creating his sudden wealth.

This highly informative assertive (Searle, 1979) serves as an effective pragmatic weapon. Applying Austin (1962), the perlocutionary target of this statement is to totally dissolve Gatsby's social acceptability. By exposing the criminal foundation of Gatsby's fortune, Tom reinforces the traditional class hierarchy, proving that wealth generated through lower-class criminality carries no authentic weight against old-money institutions.

Extract 18 (Page 144)

"'You two start on home, Daisy,' said Tom. 'In Mr. Gatsby's car.' ... 'Go on. He won't annoy you. I think he realizes that his presumptuous little flirtation is over.'"

Having completely deflated his opponent's challenge, Tom condescendingly orders Daisy to return to Long Island accompanied by Gatsby.

This turn functions as an advanced display of pragmatic dominance, relying on a transparent directive act (Searle, 1979). In Austin's (1962) terminology, the illocutionary force here conveys an unshakeable class confidence. By placing his wife back inside the vehicle of his defeated rival, Tom performatively shows that Gatsby has been stripped of all social threat, reinforcing his ownership over Daisy and his total victory over the intruder.

Extract 19 (Page 130)

"'Let's have some gas!' cried Tom roughly. 'What do you think we stopped for—to admire the view?'"

Pulling into Wilson's industrial garage in a frantic state, Tom demands immediate attention, completely overlooking George Wilson's visible physical suffering.

Tom delivers a harsh directive combined with a sarcastic rhetorical question that works as an expressive of acute irritation (Searle, 1979). Following Austin (1962), this exercitive act strips the mechanic of any personal dignity. Tom's illocutionary force treats the working-class citizen purely as a transactional tool for elite convenience, highlighting the structural callousness embedded within the era's class stratification.

Extract 20 (Page 131)

"He rested for a moment against the pump, shading his eyes. 'And now she's going whether she wants to or not. I'm going to get her away.'"

George Wilson, having finally uncovered his wife's hidden infidelity, shares his desperate plan of relocating out West with Tom.

Wilson adopts a commissive act (Searle, 1979) to vocalize his future domestic choices. Evaluated via Austin's (1962) theory, this statement is a fragile attempt by an oppressed man to reclaim his destroyed patriarchal agency. Unable to compete economically, Wilson tries to restore control over his private domestic space through a firm verbal commitment, though his total lack of actual capital leaves the perlocutionary outcome deeply compromised.

Extract 21 (Page 170)

"'I spoke to her,' he muttered, after a long silence. 'I told her she might fool me but she couldn't fool God.'"

Following the vehicular death of his wife, a broken Wilson explains his earlier confrontation with Myrtle, looking out toward the massive, fading billboard eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg.

This turn represents an assertive act (Searle, 1979) packed with metaphysical meaning. In an Austinian (1962) framework, Wilson's complete lack of social and economic leverage forces him to lean on an abstract, divine authority to support his illocutionary force. Because his own words carry no weight within the class hierarchy, he borrows the absolute authority of "God" to construct a valid judgment against his wife's actions.

Extract 22 (Page 191)

"'What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him. He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy's but he was a tough one. He ran over Myrtle like you'd run over a dog and never even stopped his car.'"

Months after Gatsby's death, Tom justifies his past choice of directing the armed and unstable Wilson toward Gatsby's residence.

Tom relies on a sequence of assertives (Searle, 1979) to manufacture a defensive historical narrative. Following Austin (1962), this is a potent verdictive act, where Tom casts himself as the ultimate judge of social value. By framing Gatsby as a reckless criminal who deserved his fate, Tom's illocutionary force successfully cleanses himself and Daisy of all moral liability, illustrating the supreme privilege of the upper class to manipulate truth and sacrifice lower-status lives without consequences.

Extract 23 (Page 19)

"'All right,' I said, 'I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.'"

Daisy outlines the deeply cynical moment she experienced upon learning the female gender of her child, fully aware of her husband's ongoing infidelity.

Searle (1979) catalogs this turn as an expressive act that lays bare Daisy's inner despair and societal resignation. Through Austin's (1962) lens, the illocutionary force operates as a tragic acknowledgment of gendered powerlessness within the upper class. Despite her immense material security, Daisy recognizes that intellectual awareness only breeds suffering for a woman under a patriarchal structure; thus, she performatively wishes for ignorance as a viable survival strategy.

Extract 24 (Page 128)

"'Her voice is full of money,' he said suddenly."

Gatsby successfully delivers the defining description for the elusive, enchanting qualities of Daisy's speech pattern that Nick had struggled to frame.

This metaphorical assertive turn (Searle, 1979) offers an advanced flash of sociopragmatic clarity. According to Austin (1962), this illocutionary act successfully anchors human identity and romantic attraction directly to material capital. Gatsby's phrasing acknowledges that within their world, the absolute peak of aesthetic desire is inextricably bound to the acoustic ring and social protection of generational wealth.

Extract 25 (Page 113)

"'I'd a little rather not be the polo player,' said Tom pleasantly, 'I'd rather look at all these famous people in—in oblivion.'"

Exasperated at being continuously labeled by Gatsby as "the polo player" in front of the party guests, Tom voices his extreme elitist contempt for the gathering.

Tom displays a passive-aggressive expressive combined with a firm assertive (Searle, 1979), masking his class hostility behind a calm delivery ("pleasantly"). In Austinian (1962) terms, the intended perlocutionary effect is total social erasure. By stating his desire to view the new-money crowd from a space of "oblivion," Tom uses his aristocratic standing to dismiss Gatsby's entire social world as invisible and irrelevant, maintaining the traditional lines of social stratification.

Discussion

The analytical outcomes of this investigation firmly establish that within F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, verbal conversations go far beyond simple narrative progression. Instead, speech acts serve not merely as a means of basic communication, but actively operate as primary mechanisms of social and psychological control (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979). By evaluating the 25 extracted conversational turns through a Speech Act perspective, it becomes clear that linguistic success and performative execution within the novel are tightly bound to the speaker's socio-economic and cultural capital. The unequal distribution of illocutionary forces among the characters clearly maps the unyielding boundaries separating 'Old Money,' 'New Money,' and the marginalized working class.

1. The Linguistic Hegemony and Symbolic Violence of 'Old Money'

The data collected regarding Tom Buchanan—spanning his interactions at his East Egg manor, Wilson's garage, and the Plaza Hotel suite—clearly illustrates the total verbal dominance wielded by the traditional aristocracy. The findings confirm that Tom routinely implements unmitigated directives and aggressive assertives to dictate the physical movements and social positions of those around him, such as when he abruptly overrules the street dog vendor or commands Daisy to ride home in Gatsby's vehicle. According to Searle (1979), the effective execution of a directive act inherently demands that the speaker hold valid authority over the listener. Tom's deeply entrenched familial wealth supplies him with an unshakeable platform for this authority.

Furthermore, Tom's conversational supremacy functions as a direct manifestation of "symbolic violence." As established in Bourdieu's theory of Symbolic Violence, language and cultural structures house hidden forms of coercion that maintain social stratifications and power asymmetries without needing to deploy explicit physical force. Tom utilizes his assertives as verdictive acts designed to invalidate others, most notably when he

exposes Gatsby's illegal bootlegging operations to instantly dissolve his rival's manufactured social standing. By aggressively controlling what constitutes truth and what is deemed acceptable, Tom weaponizes speech acts to defend his position at the apex of the social hierarchy.

2. Pragmatic Failure and the Illusory Power of 'New Money'

In complete contrast to Tom's effortless hegemony, Jay Gatsby's conversational patterns, as mapped out in the findings, expose the chronic vulnerabilities of the *nouveau riche*. Gatsby relies heavily on repetitive expressive acts—such as over-mitigated apologies—and the constant deployment of the manufactured vocative "old sport" to construct an artificial elite persona. However, as noted in recent pragmatic literature, intended perlocutionary outcomes do not always correspond with the speaker's strategic goals, underscoring the deep complexity of interpersonal exchanges (Sofyan et al., 2024; Anggraeni & Syafikha, 2026).

Gatsby's ultimate downfall is fundamentally a failure of pragmatic felicity. He operates under the delusion that his newly acquired financial wealth automatically grants him the performative capability to reshape reality. When he uses aggressive assertives to demand that Daisy completely wipe out her marital history with Tom by declaring she never loved her husband, he directly violates Austin's (1962) foundational "felicity conditions". Austin argues that for a performative utterance to achieve its purpose (to be felicitous), the speaker must possess the recognized social standing and circumstantial legitimacy. Gatsby holds vast financial capital, but he completely lacks the necessary historical and cultural validation. As a consequence, his illocutionary maneuvers fail to generate the targeted perlocutionary effect on Daisy, proving that New Money cannot simply purchase the discursive privileges inherent to the established upper class.

3. The Linguistic Marginalization of the Working Class

The working-class characters, George and Myrtle Wilson, occupy an arena of profound communicative deprivation, as demonstrated by their continuous dialogic failures within the findings. George Wilson's verbal attempts are largely ignored or coldly dismissed by Tom. When George finally attempts to enforce patriarchal control over his domestic space through a commissive act by promising to force his wife to move out West, his statement lacks the vital economic backing required to be felicitous. As a severely marginalized individual, George's language possesses no performative weight in the material world, ultimately forcing him to lean on the abstract, distant authority of "God" (symbolized by the billboard eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg) to validate his marital judgments.

Myrtle Wilson's tragic path further highlights the severe dangers of attempting to cross rigid class boundaries through conversational manipulation. The findings show Myrtle attempting to seize the speech privileges of the elite—using sharp directives toward her husband and projecting a false aura of social superiority through "borrowed power" during the New York apartment party. However, when she directly challenges the elite by repeatedly screaming Daisy's name through a defiant commissive turn, she commits a fatal pragmatic transgression. In a heavily stratified society, when the lower class attempts to claim the discursive rights of the upper class, the dominant group often handles the transgression with immediate violence to preserve societal order. Tom's instant physical assault on Myrtle proves that when linguistic and symbolic hegemony is directly threatened by a lower-class subject, the elite will swiftly transition to brute force to silence them and protect the structural status quo.

Conclusion

By investigating F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* through the analytical lenses of J.L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1979), this scholarly work has mapped the intricate crossroads where literary criticism and pragmatic theory meet. The thorough examination of the characters' interactive dialogues successfully confirms that spoken statements in the book perform tasks far beyond simple informational exchanges. Instead, they operate as central mechanisms designed for challenging authority, displaying dominance, and sustaining steep class frameworks. By mapping the precise illocutionary functions deployed within the story, this investigation validates the argument that conversational capacity is fundamentally bound up with an individual's socioeconomic and cultural capital.

The gathered data reveals a massive structural disparity regarding the deployment and reception of speech acts across separate social hierarchies. Figures anchored within the traditional 'Old Money' elite, most notably Tom Buchanan, regularly turn to blunt directives and uncompromising assertives to claim personal authority and commit symbolic violence against their subordinates. Tom instrumentalizes daily speech to construct immediate relational realities and silence vulnerable individuals, showing that upper-class wacana serves as an effective apparatus for structural social control. On the other end of the spectrum, Jay Gatsby's 'New Money' positioning culminates in a catastrophic breakdown of pragmatic felicity. Even with his vast material fortunes, Gatsby does not possess the historical background or cultural validation necessary to satisfy the strict felicity conditions of his performative assertions. His ill-fated conviction that financial capital alone could performatively erase historical paths and remodel social stratification ends in total failure, showing how difficult it is for newly generated wealth to infiltrate deeply entrenched aristocratic circles.

Additionally, this study lays bare the acute communicative containment experienced by the lower-class characters. George and Myrtle Wilson are fundamentally stripped of authentic performative leverage inside the narrative. When lower-status individuals attempt to claim or replicate the authoritative speech options belonging to the elite—such as Myrtle's confrontational commissive choices—their interactive boundary-crossing is handled with swift and aggressive physical termination by the dominant class. This hostile reaction proves that within a deeply stratified social matrix, conversational authority cannot be temporarily borrowed or artificialized without triggering destructive repercussions.

In the final analysis, this sociopragmatic reading demonstrates that Fitzgerald purposefully organized his characters' dialogue to accurately mirror the highly unequal power arrangements characteristic of 1920s America. Utilizing Speech Act theory upon this classic American novel proves highly successful in exposing the covert, structural systems of class oppression hiding inside day-to-day conversation. This investigation yields an important contribution to contemporary sociopragmatics by illustrating that verbal power is defended, fought over, and unevenly shared in a manner that directly mirrors material assets

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