

Obsession in F.Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby through Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory(1987):A Pragmatic Study

# Assistant Instructor Israa Faisal Abed Jasim Al-Janaby<sup>1</sup>

1. Assistance Instructor in Al-Nahrain University, Continuing Education Center<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

The current paper examines the issue of obsession in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), providing a distinct pragmatic viewpoint on the characters' interactions. The use of this theoretical framework reveals how politeness strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald on-record strategies—serve not only as tools for social interaction, but also as mechanisms that reflect and reinforce the characters' obsessive behaviors. Gatsby's obsessive idealization of Daisy, his attempts to control the past, Tom's obsessive desire for domination, and Daisy's unwillingness to accept emotional truths are all explored using particular linguistic tactics like as hyperbole, rhetorical questions, hedging, and imperatives.

# Introduction:

According to Sigmund Freud obsession is:

"a persistent and intrusive fixation originating from repressed desires and unresolved internal conflicts, often manifesting in compulsive behaviors and irrational actions" (Freud, 1917, P.214).

Freud's (1917) definition of obsession as the result of oppressed thoughts and past conflicts had a significant impact on the interpretation of literary characters and plots. Literary critics typically employ this freudian frame to evaluate characters whose acts are motivated by unconscious obsessions that impair their social and psychological balance. For example, Lionel Trilling (1950) contends that obsession in literature frequently emerges as a character's struggle to unite internal wants with exterior realities.

Additionally, Harold Bloom (1973) believes that literary obsession represents more complex psychological conflict in which characters fight with impossible goals or buried traumas. Bloom understands characters' obsessive behaviors as an artistic vehicle for exploring human fragility and emotional extravagance.

Julia Kristeva (1980) expands on Freud's concepts by identifying obsession with the concept of desire as a disruptive force. Kristeva underlines that "obsession in literature frequently reflects characters' pursuit of unachievable ideals", reflecting the human condition's innate craving for what is always out of reach. This interpretation extends Freud's concept of repression by defining fixation as a cycle of want and denial, emphasizing its thematic relevance in literary works.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>. Email: israa.faisal@nahrainuniv.edu.iq

,ThereforeFreud's description of obsession gives a solid foundation for understanding how it is portrayed in literature. Critics like as Trilling, Bloom, and Kristeva use Freud's concepts to examine how obsession influences characters' actions, reveals internal conflicts, and produces narrative suspense. Obsession appears as a major element in literary explorations of the complexity of human behavior and emotional depth.

## **Brief Plot Summary of The Great Gatsby**

F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" was written in the summer of 1922, during the Jazz Age, and tells the story of Jay Gatsby, a mystery billionaire famed for throwing extravagant parties. Nick Carraway, a newcomer to West Egg, Long Island, narrates the story, which tackles themes of ambition, love, and social class. Gatsby is revealed to be extremely fascinated with Nick's cousin Daisy Buchanan, and spends years acquiring fortune in an attempt to win her back following their brief affair before World War I.

Daisy, on the other hand, is married to Tom Buchanan, who is both affluent and pompous. Despite rekindling her affair with Gatsby, Daisy eventually chooses Tom over Gatsby, unable to leave her affluent existence. The tale concludes in tragedy when Gatsby accepts responsibility for a car accident caused by Daisy, which leads to his killing by the victim's devastated husband(Fitzgerald, 1925).

#### **Obsession in The Great Gatsby**

Obsession is a key subject in "The Great Gatsby", notably as manifested by Jay Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby's obsession with reliving the past, as well as his idealization of Daisy, serve as a larger reflection on the pitfalls of compulsive desire and the mirage of the American Dream. Gatsby's fascination with Daisy turns her into a symbol of perfection rather than a genuine person. The critics of literature believe that his love is less about Daisy than about what she represents—wealth, position, and the realization of his ambition. This idealization is obvious in his attempts to reproduce the past, as the narrator, Nick Carraway, notices Gatsby's view that "can't repeat the past." Gatsby's belief stems from his inability to acknowledge the transience of life and relationships, demonstrating how infatuation blinds him to reality (York Notes, 2021).

Critics also point to the importance of social and class differences in feeding Gatsby's passion. His pursuit of Daisy shows his ambition to be a member of the privileged class, which he eventually fails to achieve despite his money. Moreover, critics argue that Gatsby's infatuation is futile since his idealized view of Daisy does not match her true nature, which adds to his collapse. The contrast between illusion and reality emphasizes the destructive character of compulsive wants (Thinking Literature, n.d.; Literary Devices, n.d.).

The psychological approach investigates Gatsby's preoccupation as a sign of unresolved internal issues. Gatsby's unwillingness to move on from his prior relationship with Daisy demonstrates his emotional immaturity and reliance on external reinforcement, demonstrating how obsession distorts his notions of love and achievement (York Notes, 2021).

In conclusion, the topic of obsession in "The Great Gatsby" criticizes the human inclination to idealize the unreachable and warns of the perils of living for illusions rather than reality. This subject serves as a cautionary story about the personal and societal consequences of compulsive ambition and unmet goals.

The preceding paragraphs focus on the literary aspects of the issue of obsession in The Great Gatsby. It investigates how F. Scott Fitzgerald depicts obsession as a negative force that shapes individuals' behavior, relationships, and eventual demise. The above mentioned literary studies examines Jay Gatsby's and other characters' compulsive habits using symbolic, thematic, and societal critiques.

Meanwhile, the current study investigates the issue of obsession from a linguistic viewpoint, with a particular emphasis on pragmatic analysis. Pragmatics, a field of linguistics, investigates how meaning is communicated through language in context. This study uses Politeness Theory to investigate how the subject of obsession is expressed via conversation, interactions, and character language choices in "The Great Gatsby". This pragmatic theory emphasizes the subtle ways in which obsession is mirrored and perpetuated verbally, offering insights that differ from solely literary evaluations.

# **Previous Studies**

Obsession in "The Great Gatsby" has been extensively researched, with experts providing various viewpoints over time. These studies investigate the issue using literary analysis, social commentary, and linguistic frameworks, offering insight on how obsession functions thematically and proficiently in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel. Starting with the scope of literature, one of the first notable discussions is by Lionel Trilling (1945), who examines Jay Gatsby's fascination with Daisy Buchanan as a psychological incapacity to discriminate between illusion and reality. According to Trilling, Gatsby's obsession with an idealized version of Daisy represents a general inclination to pursue unrealistic aspirations, which eventually leads to disappointment and tragedy.

Matthew J. Bruccoli (1992) brings a sociological perspective to the topic, highlighting the role of class in developing Gatsby's preoccupation. According to Bruccoli, Gatsby's obsession with Daisy is inextricably linked to his desire to rise beyond his lower-class roots and enter the exclusive social sphere she symbolizes. This preoccupation reflects the tight social systems of the 1920s and demonstrates how Gatsby's amorous quest is linked to his ambition for advancement.

James Callahan (1996) connects Gatsby's connection with Daisy to the American Dream, claiming that she represents more than just romantic love. Daisy represents money prosperity and social approval to Callahan,

demonstrating the moral emptiness of a culture that associates personal ties with achievement. Gatsby's mixture of love and ambition criticizes the Jazz Age's skewed morals, eventually revealing the hollowness of his ambitions. Within the scope of linguistics, scholars have examined how language reflects Gatsby's compulsive tendencies. Paul Simpson (2004) argues that Fitzgerald's fractured conversation and emotional reinforcement represent Gatsby's inner anguish. Simpson contends that Gatsby's idealistic yet apprehensive speech reflects his difficulty to reconcile imagination and reality, portraying the intensity of his obsession through storytelling tactics. Locher and Watts (2005) change the traditional Politeness Theory and introduce the notion of relational work, which emphasizes the dynamic negotiation of interpersonal interactions. They look at how Gatsby's interactions with Daisy demonstrate his compulsive desire for praise and affection. Gatsby's overdone politeness and grandiose vocabulary help him preserve his image and social face while also revealing his emotional fragility. This dynamic method focuses on how Fitzgerald's characters utilize language to negotiate difficult social conventions and emotional states.

The issue of obsession in "The Great Gatsby" has been intensively researched over decades, with experts examining its literary, social, and linguistic aspects. Trilling's psychological study laid the groundwork for subsequent interpretations by Bruccoli and Callahan, who focused on class and the American Dream. Meanwhile, linguistic studies by Simpson, Locher and Watts, show that Fitzgerald's language mirrors the psychological and social intricacies of fixation. Together, these viewpoints give a thorough comprehension of the novel's theme's continuing relevance.

Bsides, the Politeness Theory which was initially developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in 1987, has been widely used in literary analysis, enabling researchers to investigate the details of interpersonal relations and character mechanisms in novels and plays. The idea addresses how people handle their social interactions, such as their desire to keep a happy or negative face, and how language may either alleviate or worsen social tensions. Early research showed that politeness methods might disclose greater insights into power relations, societal structures, and characters' mental conditions.

Holmes (1995) was one of the first to apply Politeness Theory to literary analysis, highlighting its importance in uncovering social dynamics and character connections. Holmes contended that politeness is an effective technique for understanding how characters establish authority, preserve social position, and exhibit weakness. She emphasized how indirect speech actions and deferential language in literature frequently reflect society norms and expectations, providing a means to critically assess the fundamental power dynamics in a narrative. Similarly, Culpeper et al. (2003) extended on this idea by investigating how characters' use of politeness might represent the paradoxes in their social roles. They stated that, while characters may employ courteous language on the surface, their actions or intents frequently reflect underlying conflict or secret goals, complicating their relationships and exposing a deeper depth of character psychology.

Liao (2012), for example, investigated the use of politeness in Pride and Prejudice, claiming that Jane Austen employs politeness not just as a social practice, but also to uncover interior problems among people. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet convey their aspirations and anxieties through indirect speech and hedging, making etiquette an important aspect of the story and building up characters. The growing scholarly interest in politeness in literary works demonstrates Politeness Theory's potential to provide new insights into character motives, social relationships, and dramatic mechanisms.

## Method:

This study uses a qualitative research approach, namely textual analysis and a pragmatic framework, to examine the issue of obsession in "The Great Gatsby". The emphasis is on evaluating how politeness tactics, as stated in Politeness Theory, are applied in critical interactions to better understand the function of preoccupation in the characters' relationships and growth.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) is a key concept in pragmatics, explaining how people use language to preserve social peace and regulate face-threatening acts (FTAs). According to this idea, "face" refers to" the public self-image" that people strive to preserve throughout conversation. It is separated into two aspects which are: Firstly, the positive face which refers to the desire to be liked, respected, or approved by others. Secondly the negative face: the need for independence and freedom from intrusion.

Basically, the politeness theory describes tactics that speakers employ to reduce FTAs and maintain the listener's favorable or negative facial expression, depending on the circumstances and the interlocutors' connection. The fundamental politeness strategies and linguistic techniquesare the followings:

## 1.Bald On-Record

This strategy is utilized when the speaker carries out the FTA immediately and without mitigating. It is frequently employed in instances where clarity or efficiency are important, such as in an emergency, or when the connection allows for directness. The linguistic techniques of this strategy includes:

- Imperatives: "Open the window."
- Direct statements: "She needs me to help me now."
- No mitigation: "I am late."

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), "This strategy is used when the face threat is minimized by circumstances or when efficiency is more important than face" (p. 95).

## **2.**Positive Politeness

This strategy encourages the listener's positive attitude by expressing acceptance, friendship, or similar interests. It promotes intimacy and connection.

- Compliments: "You're amazing at this; could you help me?"
- Inclusive language: "Let's solve this together."
- Exaggeration: "You're the absolute best person for this job!"
- Jokes or humor: Lightening the mood, e.g., "Only you could handle this chaos!"

Brown and Levinson (1987) define positive politeness as a method to "claim common ground or emphasize solidarity" (pp. 101-129).

### **1. Negative Politeness**

The strategy aims to reduce imposition while demonstrating respect, addressing the listener's unpleasant face by providing choices or admitting the imposition.

- Hedging: "I was wondering if you might help with this."
- Apologies: "I'm sorry to trouble you, but..."
- Modal verbs: "Could you possibly...?" or "Would it be alright if...?"
- Passive voice: "It seems mistakes were made."

Brown and Levinson explains, "This strategy is oriented towards redressing the imposition and showing respect for the hearer's desire not to be imposed upon" (1987, p. 132).

## 3.Off-Record

Off-the-record techniques focus on indirectness, which allows for interpretation. This method enables the speaker to avoid taking direct responsibility for the FTA.

- Hints: "It's cold in here" (implying someone should close the window).
- Understatements: "It's not the best weather for a picnic" (meaning it's raining heavily).
- Rhetorical questions: "Isn't it a bit late to start this now?"
- Metaphors or analogies: "We're spinning our wheels here."
- Ambiguity: "Well, that's one way to look at it."

Brown and Levinson (1987) explain, "Off-record acts allow the speaker to avoid taking responsibility for the FTA while still communicating the intended meaning" (p. 211).

The data for this study will be gathered from key scenes in the novel in which interpersonal interactions are crucial to the storyline. Examples include Gatsby and Daisy's chats at his estate, Tom's clashes with Gatsby, and the social interactions during Gatsby's parties. These scenes are notably dialogueheavy, demonstrating how politeness methods serve as both a social tool and a narrative device for developing concepts of obsession.

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#### **Data Analysis:**

The current section examines chosen extracts from The Great Gatsby using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) to determine how characters utilize politeness techniques to navigate social encounters. These tactics are examined to see how they relate to the novel's fundamental topic of obsession. By recognizing particular linguistic methods such as rhetorical questions, hedging, imperatives, and metaphors, the study shows how characters communicate their obsessions via conversation and actions.

This part analyzes the data by identifying instances of politeness strategies in the text, determining the method and technique used, and investigating how these aspects contribute to the psychological and thematic characteristics of obsession. Through a pragmatic lens, the study connects language usage to the novel's underlying emotional and social dynamics, providing insights into how Fitzgerald's characters articulate and reinforce their obsessions via speech and interaction.

### Extract 1:

"Your voice is full of money," he said suddenly. That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it..." (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 120)

In this passage, Gatsby used positive politeness and a metaphor to show his adoration for Daisy's voice. By describing her voice as "full of money," he idealizes her as a symbol of prosperity. Daisy is portrayed as a symbol of Gatsby's ideal of riches, and the overstatement ("inexhaustible charm") raises her to nearly celestial status. The sensory picture ("the jingle of it, the cymbals' song") heightens the image, linking her voice with material prosperity. The relationship to obsession is Gatsby's projection of his desire for fortune and prestige onto Daisy. His focus on her voice, and hence on her link to riches, reflects his compulsive pursuit of an idealized vision of the American Dream. Gatsby loves Daisy not for herself, but for what she represents—his impossible ideal of prosperity and social mobility. This obsessive fixation on riches and rank distorts his sense of reality, rendering Daisy only an item to be possessed.

### Exract2:

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 116)

Gatsby's rhetorical question exemplifies the off-the-record technique. By framing his viewpoint as a question, he avoids issuing a straight order, allowing Daisy to react without feeling compelled. However, the indirect nature of his speech (he does not explicitly demand that they relive the past, but rather suggests it) creates a more emotionally charged environment, expressing his obsessive focus on retrieving the past. The exaggeration in "of course" implies that Gatsby's belief is so strong that it approaches denial. The

employment of off-the-record approach demonstrates Gatsby's obsession with the past and inability to embrace reality. He is unable to go beyond his idealized picture of life with Daisy, and his denial of the passage of time reflects his compulsive character. His language here reveals a strong inability to accept the constraints of the present, typical of obsessive thinking, when the subject frequently becomes obsessed on a former experience or an unachievable ideal.

## Extract 3:

"Oh, you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby. "I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past." (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 133)

Daisy's comment demonstrates negative politeness through hedging and the use of modality. She requires the remark "I can't help what's past," which is a type of mitigation that permits her to avoid Gatsby's demand for a clean split from Tom. Her use of modality ("I love you now—isn't that enough?") raises questions about her sentiments, implying that, while she loves Gatsby, she is not ready to completely reject her past. The hedging reduces the emotional effect of her disapproval. This conversation emphasizes Daisy's unwillingness to fully succumb to Gatsby's obsessive needs. While Gatsby is obsessed with reliving the past, Daisy's negative politeness demonstrates her understanding of the complexities of emotions and the repercussions of such preoccupation. The use of negative politeness reflects her dissatisfaction with Gatsby's relentless pursuit and her need to maintain her autonomy. Her attempt to reconcile her feelings for Gatsby with her connections to Tom indicates her uncertainty in the face of Gatsby's excessive fixation.

#### Extract 4:

"I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife." (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 137)

Tom's comment is a bald on-the-record technique in which he publicly attacks Gatsby without any repercussions. Tom's directness in addressing Gatsby as "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" reveals his hostility and desire to impose power over him. The statement's directness illustrates Tom's sense of entitlement to Daisy as well as his displeasure of Gatsby's intrusion into his life. Tom's harsh confrontation is directly related to his obsessive desire to keep authority over Daisy. He seeks to humiliate Gatsby reveals a frantic attempt to reassert his own superiority, which stems from his compulsive desire to possess Daisy without hindrance. This bald on-the-record tactic displays Tom's demand for social and emotional control, highlighting his own obsessive instincts to protect his position and marriage.

### Extract 5:

"Just tell him the truth—that you never loved him—and it's all wiped out forever." (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 132)

Gatsby's imperative request, "Just tell him the truth," is a bald on-the-record technique. He urges that Daisy tell Tom she has never loved him, regardless

of the social or emotional ramifications. The directness and forceful tone emphasize Gatsby's emotional despair and yearning to forget the past, particularly Tom's role in Daisy's life. This bald on-the-record tactic reflects Gatsby's compulsive personality. He cannot accept any competing claims to Daisy's devotion, and his insistence that she conceal her relationship with Tom indicates his compulsive desire to dominate her emotions and their shared history. His preoccupation on recreating their shared history highlights his reluctance to let go of the idealized image of their connection, which is a characteristic of obsession.

## Findingsof the Study :

The examination of The Great Gatsby utilizing Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory yields important insights into the characters' intimate relationships and obsession. Key characters use Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies to reflect and magnify their obsessive tendencies. This theoty reveals that the politeness techniques are more than simply social tools; they are inextricably linked to the psychological and emotional obsessions that motivate the characters. In this respect, the findings of the current study are summarized in the following points:

1.Positive Politeness and Obsession with Idealisation

Gatsby's use of positive politeness to complement Daisy's voice reveals his compulsive romanticization of her. The metaphor he used, "Your voice is full of money," is not only a praise, but rather an idealized view of Daisy as a symbol of riches and position, which Gatsby pursues compulsively. His use of hyperbole and sensory imagery to describe her voice (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 120) demonstrates his concern with Daisy's material prosperity rather than any genuine connection with her as a person. This demonstrates how positive politeness may be used to reinforce an obsessive narrative, in which the person being complimented is idealized to the point of distortion.

2.Off-Record Strategy and Obsession with the Past

Gatsby employs the off-the-record tactic when he says, "Can't we replay the past? Of course, you can. (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 116) exemplifies how indirectness works to portray his compulsive denial of truth. This method, albeit less direct, allows Gatsby to maintain the appearance of controlling and repeating the past. The rhetorical question and exaggeration he employs highlight his profound reluctance to embrace time's constraints and his obsessive desire to recreate his past with Daisy, demonstrating how off-therecord methods may portray the severity of an individual's internal preoccupation.

3. Bald On-Record Strategy and Tom's Aggression.

Tom's employment of the bald on-record tactic, as shown in his confrontation with Gatsby in Chapter 7 ("I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife."), indicates a forthright, aggressive response to Gatsby's perceived danger to his marriage. Tom's

directness and aggressiveness reveal his compulsive drive to control Daisy and dominate Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 137). This frank on-the-record reaction is more than just a social ploy; it expresses Tom's inner fears and compulsive drive to dominate the situation, demonstrating how language closely mimics obsessive tendencies in relationships.

4.Bald on- Recorded Strategy and Gatsby's Control In another instance of bald on-record, Gatsby instructs Daisy, "Just tell him the truth—that you never loved him—and it's all wiped out forever" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 132). This necessary remark demonstrates Gatsby's obsessive desire to erase the past and reinvent Daisy's relationship with Tom. His straightforward demand that Daisy reject Tom demonstrates the severity of his fixation and desire to control her feelings and choices, as well as how stark on-record techniques may perpetuate obsessive control in relationships. **Conclusion**:

This study examined "The Great Gatsby" using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory to investigate how various politeness strategies, such as positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and bald on-record strategies, function within the novel to reveal key characters' obsessive personalities. The study shows that these language tactics govern social interactions while also reflecting the characters' underlying psychological compulsive dvnamics and behaviors. Gatsby's obsessive idealization of Daisy, conveyed through positive politeness and metaphor, indicates his desire for fortune and rank. His incapacity to accept the passage of time is demonstrated by his employment of off-the-record methods, such as rhetorical inquiries and indirectness, which allow him to preserve the illusion of control over the past. Tom's stark onthe-record aggressiveness emphasizes his obsessive desire for control, but Daisy's use of negative politeness indicates her hesitation to entirely yield to either man, highlighting the narrative's complicated emotional and psychological conflict.

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