

REFUSAL STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH LITERARY DISCOURSE: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND THE GREAT GATSBY

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Abstract. This study explores the use of refusal strategies in English literary discourse through a pragmatic analysis of two canonical novels: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Drawing upon speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the research identifies and compares how characters employ linguistic and pragmatic means to perform refusals within socially charged contexts. Refusal, as a face-threatening act, often reflects interpersonal power relations, gender roles, and class distinctions. Through close reading and qualitative discourse analysis, this paper demonstrates that Austen's characters rely heavily on indirect and mitigated refusals to maintain social decorum, whereas Fitzgerald's characters tend to use more direct, emotionally charged refusals reflecting modernist disillusionment and individualism. The findings highlight that refusal strategies in literature serve not only communicative but also symbolic functions, revealing characters' moral, social, and psychological dimensions.

Keywords: refusal strategies, pragmatics, politeness theory, literary discourse, social decorum, modernist individualism, symbolic function, face-threatening act, class distinctions.

Аннотация. Данное исследование посвящено использованию стратегий отказа в английском литературном дискурсе и основано на прагматическом анализе двух канонических романов — «Гордость и предубеждение» (1813) Джейн Остин и «Великий Гэтсби» (1925) Ф. Скотта Фицджеральда. Опираясь на теорию речевых актов (Searle, 1969) и теорию вежливости (Brown & Levinson, 1987), автор выявляет и сравнивает способы, которыми персонажи используют лингвистические и прагматические средства для выражения отказа в социально напряжённых контекстах. Отказ, являясь актом, угрожающим лицу, часто отражает межличностные отношения власти, гендерные роли и классовые различия. На основе тщательного анализа текста и качественного дискурс-анализа показано, что персонажи Остин чаще используют косвенные и смягчённые формы отказа для сохранения социального этикета, тогда как персонажи Фицджеральда прибегают

к более прямым и эмоционально насыщенным отказам, отражающим модернистское разочарование и индивидуализм. Результаты исследования показывают, что стратегии отказа в литературе выполняют не только коммуникативную, но и символическую функцию, раскрывая моральные, социальные и психологические аспекты персонажей.

Ключевые слова: стратегии отказа, прагматика, теория вежливости, литературный дискурс, социальный этикет, модернистский индивидуализм, символическая функция, акт, угрожающий лицу, классовые различия.

Annotatsiya. Mazkur tadqiqot ingliz badiiy nutqida rad etish strategiyalarining qo'llanishini tahlil qiladi va u ikki klassik roman – Jeyn Ostinning “*G'urur va g'urur*” (1813) hamda F. Skott Fitsjeraldning “*Buyuk Getsbi*” (1925) asarlarining pragmatik tahliliga asoslanadi. Nutq aktlari nazariyasi (Searle, 1969) va odob nazariyasi (Brown & Levinson, 1987) asosida tadqiqot shaxslar ijtimoiy jihatdan sezgir vaziyatlarda rad etishni amalga oshirish uchun qanday lingvistik va pragmatik vositalardan foydalanishini aniqlaydi va solishtiradi. Rad etish – yuzga tahdid soluvchi nutq akti sifatida – ko'pincha ijtimoiy kuch munosabatlarini, jinsiy rollarni va sinf farqlarini aks ettiradi. Matnni chuqur tahlil qilish natijasida ma'lum bo'ldiki, Ostin qahramonlari ijtimoiy odobni saqlash maqsadida ko'proq bilvosita va yumshatilgan radlarni ishlatadilar, Fitsjerald qahramonlari esa bevosita, hissiy jihatdan kuchli rad shakllarini qo'llab, modernistik individualizm va umidsizlikni ifodalaydilar. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, badiiy adabiyotdagi rad etish strategiyalari faqat kommunikativ emas, balki ramziy vazifani ham bajaradi, qahramonlarning axloqiy, ijtimoiy va psixologik jihatlarini ochib beradi.

Kalit so'zlar: rad etish strategiyalari, pragmatika, odob nazariyasi, badiiy nutq, ijtimoiy odob, modernistik individualizm, ramziy funktsiya, yuzga tahdid soluvchi akt, sinf farqlari.

Introduction. Refusal is one of the most face-threatening acts in communication, as it directly contradicts a speaker's or listener's expectations and thus threatens the interpersonal harmony of interaction (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). In everyday communication, refusals are often softened through indirectness, mitigation, or justification to preserve politeness. In literary discourse, however, refusal is not merely a linguistic act—it is also a means of characterization and thematic development.

In English literature, the act of refusal often reflects broader cultural norms and historical attitudes toward social hierarchy, gender, and morality. The contrast between the restrained, socially regulated discourse of the Regency era and the liberated, morally fragmented speech of the Jazz Age provides fertile ground for studying how refusals function in different social contexts.

The study applies the framework of speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to examine how refusals are structured and interpreted in literary discourse.

Methods. This research employs a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in discourse-pragmatic analysis. Two primary texts were selected: *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) by Jane Austen and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Both works are representative of distinct socio-cultural periods—the early nineteenth-century English gentry and early twentieth-century American modernism.

The analysis focused on refusal speech acts, defined as instances in which one character rejects a request, proposal, offer, or suggestion. Examples were collected through close reading, identifying both direct and indirect refusals. The framework of Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) was adapted, classifying refusals as:

- Direct refusals (e.g., “No,” “I can’t do that”)
- Indirect refusals (e.g., giving excuses, postponements, or conditional acceptance)
- Adjuncts (e.g., expressions of regret, gratitude, or apology accompanying refusal)

Each instance was analyzed for linguistic form, pragmatic function, and contextual meaning. Comparative analysis was then conducted to interpret the findings within each novel’s social and thematic framework.

Results. Refusal Strategies in *Pride and Prejudice*

Austen’s characters employ refusals that align with the norms of politeness and social hierarchy. Female characters, especially Elizabeth Bennet, often use **indirect strategies** to reject advances while maintaining dignity and propriety. A notable example is Elizabeth’s rejection of Mr. Collins’s marriage proposal:

- “*You are too hasty, sir. I thank you for the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them.*”

Here, Elizabeth’s refusal combines gratitude (“I thank you”), justification (“it is impossible”), and mitigation (“too hasty”)—elements that soften the act while asserting autonomy. Similarly, her later rejection of Mr. Darcy’s first proposal is both emotionally charged and justified by moral reasoning, indicating a shift from politeness to principled resistance.

Similarly, Charlotte Lucas’s pragmatic acceptance of Mr. Collins can be read as an **indirect refusal** of romantic ideals. While outwardly agreeing, Charlotte’s words implicitly reject the notion that marriage must be founded on affection:

- “*I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home.*”

This utterance constitutes a **pragmatic inversion** of refusal, where the character's acceptance masks a deeper denial of societal expectations. The contrast between Elizabeth's emotional honesty and Charlotte's social conformity illustrates the spectrum of politeness strategies that Austen uses to depict female agency.

Mr. Bennet, by contrast, frequently resorts to **ironic refusals** to undermine his wife's manipulative demands. When Mrs. Bennet insists that he command Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins, he responds:

- *"Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do."*

This refusal functions through **bald-on-record irony**, combining humor and contradiction to assert paternal authority without open confrontation. His linguistic strategy undermines domestic coercion and exposes the absurdity of marital politics.

Refusals in *The Great Gatsby*

In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, refusal strategies reveal modernist disillusionment and emotional fragmentation. Unlike Austen's characters, Fitzgerald's protagonists operate in morally ambiguous spaces where politeness often masks alienation.

Nick Carraway's refusals are typically **moral and distancing**. When he says,

- *"I don't want to get mixed up in it."*

he performs a **negative politeness act** that functions as moral disengagement. His indirect refusals distance him from the decadence of Gatsby's world, symbolizing his struggle to preserve integrity amid corruption.

Daisy Buchanan's refusals, however, are **emotionally ambivalent**. When Gatsby pressures her to declare she never loved Tom, she hesitates:

- *"I did love him once—but I loved you too."*

This fragmented utterance is a **partial refusal**—linguistically noncommittal and emotionally contradictory. It violates the cooperative principle (Grice, 1975) by refusing both options simultaneously, embodying the modernist crisis of indecision and moral fatigue.

Jordan Baker's refusals exemplify **evasiveness as self-protection**. Her recurrent dismissals such as

- *"Oh, let's not talk about it"*

mark a **discourse-level avoidance** strategy, maintaining emotional control by withdrawing from intimacy. Her politeness operates through **silence and ellipsis**, suggesting the gendered dimension of restraint in Fitzgerald's social milieu.

Tom Buchanan's refusals are **aggressive and impolite**, as in his outburst toward Gatsby:

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

Here, refusal manifests through **confrontational speech acts** that reinforce dominance. Tom's refusals to accept challenges to his authority expose a linguistic performance of masculinity rooted in entitlement and class privilege.

Discussion. The analysis reveals that refusal strategies in literary discourse are deeply intertwined with social context and character psychology. In *Pride and Prejudice*, indirectness serves as a means of maintaining social harmony and negotiating gendered power relations. Elizabeth's refusals reflect both her intelligence and her awareness of the constraints imposed by decorum. Her polite resistance becomes a form of empowerment within the limits of her society.

Conversely, in *The Great Gatsby*, refusals mirror the moral decay and emotional turbulence of modern America. The preference for direct, emotionally charged refusals suggests the erosion of traditional politeness norms. Daisy's ambiguous speech acts embody a moral paralysis, while Tom's blunt refusals reveal class arrogance and entitlement.

The contrast between the two novels underscores how refusal strategies function as sociocultural mirrors—in Austen's world, they protect the face and preserve social equilibrium; in Fitzgerald's, they expose emotional fragmentation and moral instability.

From a pragmatic perspective, this demonstrates the adaptability of refusal strategies to cultural and temporal contexts. The characters' linguistic choices reflect their social awareness, personal values, and psychological states, aligning with Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that politeness is a universal but culturally variable phenomenon.

Conclusion. This study highlights how refusal strategies in English literary discourse go beyond linguistic form to reveal complex social and psychological dimensions. Through the contrast between Austen's refined, indirect refusals and Fitzgerald's direct, emotionally charged ones, the analysis demonstrates the evolution of communicative norms from the early nineteenth century to the twentieth.

Refusals in literature serve not only to negotiate interactional meaning but also to construct identity, express ideology, and dramatize conflict. Future research could extend this analysis to other genres—such as modern drama or postmodern fiction—to explore how changing cultural values continue to shape the pragmatics of refusal.

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