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Elocution in the 1920s: The Downfall of the Great Gatsby

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In the closing pages of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald allows the reader to glimpse into the past of the mysterious Jay Gatsby. In a ragged old copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, Mr. Gatz, Jay’s father, reveals to the reader the daily routine of young Jimmy:

- Rise from bed ......................... 6:00 AM
- Dumbbell exercises and wall-scaling ....... 6:15–6:30 ”
- Study electricity, etc. ...................... 7:15–8:15 ”
- Work ........................................ 8:30–4:30 PM
- Baseball and sports ........................ 4:30–5:00 ”
- Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it ... 5:00–6:00 ”
- Study needed inventions .................. 7:00–9:00 ”

**General Resolves**
- No wasting time at Shafters or [name, indecipherable]
- No more smoking or chewing
- Bath every other day
- Read one improving book or magazine per week
- Save $5.00 [crossed out] $3.00 per week
- Be better to parents (Fitzgerald 181–82)

As Mr. Gatz closes the book, routine, and life of Jay Gatsby, he says with a sigh, “It just shows you don’t it . . . Jimmy was bound to get ahead” (Fitzgerald 182). The question then arises, did Gatsby succeed in getting ahead? Did Jim Gatz reach old money status and acceptance? In the daily routine above, Fitzgerald attributes to Jim Gatz every advice, lesson, and commandment in twentieth-century elocution: exercising for physical power and poise; cleanliness in bathing and not smoking;
workbooks for elocution and how to obtain it; and being well read. By allowing the reader to see this daily schedule, Fitzgerald characterizes Gatz with the "vigorous self-discipline" (Kleiser 1) necessary to reach his fullest potential—to truly "get ahead." But in the end, despite Jay Gatsby's claims to old money, his elocution contains a certain "rough-neck" accent that indicates to others the truth of his meager beginnings (Fitzgerald 53).

The strong prejudicial emphasis on speech during Fitzgerald's life emerged with the advancement of technology. While people had once patiently depended on sluggish steam ships to carry communication, with the invention of railroads, automobiles, and planes, hundreds of miles and several months were reduced to a few hours. The reign of speech was strengthened with the advent of the modern telephone and spread with the prevalent use of the radio and the novelty of talking pictures. The telephonic interaction increased contact, and audiences clamored to hear the spoken word in the form of entertainment.

Though the spoken word was reaching many, the power and effectiveness of oral communication remained in the hands of intellectuals and old money. Modern colleges and universities made elocution a science and the rich set the standard. In 1916, Mrs. J. W. Shoemaker, principal of The National School of Elocution and Oratory, stated:

[T]he subject of Elocution [. . .] is seen and felt in colleges, in school, and even society. It is greater than any which has pertained to delivery since the days of Grecian and Roman oratory [. . .]. To know what is natural as well as the artistic way of expressing one's self, either by the voice or in gesture, is rapidly becoming a demand of the American people. (3)

With elocution dissected through science, the standard of natural expression was then determined by old money. Why? The increase of technology was spreading oral communication, but the elite upper class cornered the market. The wealthy owned and used automobiles, planes, and telephones, which increased their visibility in public settings; their influence spread as their circumference of social interaction expanded. Luncheon clubs and hotels exclusive to old money sprang into existence.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, a prominent author of the 1920s, witnessed the established elite dictate the standard elocution and saw them solidify their social power. Old money members quarantined themselves with the use of linguistics barriers, allowing few to pass. Though one might obtain wealth, segregation still occurred as the elocution of "new money individuals" usually contained hints of unnatural expression or a "bad accent" (Fogerty 1). Therefore, the key in breaking down these linguistics walls was to master everyday conversation styles and elocution. Fitzgerald understood the importance of elocution; he planted in the heart of his character Gatsby the seed of determination and self-discipline, and in his mind the "practice of elocution [. . .] and how to attain it" (Fitzgerald 127). In this sense, young Jim Gatz's rise to the upper social echelon was scripted beautifully. Fitzgerald bestowed Jimmy with everything one needed to succeed in his venture:
“improving texts and magazines” (169), a rigorous routine, and self-discipline. Jim Gatz was ready to become Jay Gatsby, by speaking his way into old money status.

With speech saturating society and literature, manuals would have been readily available to any citizen throughout the United States. As a writer, Fitzgerald was familiar with these self-help books and realized Jim Gatz would have access to these “improving texts and magazines” (Fitzgerald 127). With these manuals, Jim would begin his quest to become Jay in four simple steps.

**Step One: “It is as important for the public speaker to develop his body as to develop his mind” (Kleiser 13).**

In order for the speaker to truly persuade his audience, the physical appearance must first be developed. One must not enter a scene as “a clammy, flabby old man with a heckling voice and a wandering eye, but as a giant ready for a giant’s task”; therefore, “a strong mind in a strong body should be the aim of every public man” (Kleiser 13). A “vigorous self-discipline” and a daily schedule must be established to reach one’s fullest potential (1). This routine must include specific physical exercises, followed by a daily bath that washes “the entire surface of the body” (15).

Fitzgerald establishes a routine for Jim Gatz, following the advice of Kleiser in listing specific exercises, dumbbell exercises and wall-scaling, and a routine of cleanliness, no more “smoking or chewing” and bathe every other day. By allowing the reader to see this daily schedule, Fitzgerald characterizes Gatz with the “vigorous self-discipline” necessary to reach his fullest potential.

**Step Two: Poise, posture, and facial expressions.**

In specifically allotting one hour to the “practice of [. . .] poise and how to attain it” (Fitzgerald 181), Jim Gatz gives importance to the physical attributes of posture, poise, and facial expressions. This emphasis on the whole countenance was also stressed in the readily accessible self-help elocution books. “Everyone reads the countenance . . .; therefore how necessary an expressive countenance becomes to speaker and reader” (Shoemaker 260).

“Let your standing position be manly, erect, easy, forceful, and impressive,” writes Kleiser in his book *Talks on Talking* (86). For this posture to be attained he adds that one must “habitually carry the chest high and full without undue straining” (15). A perfect example of this powerful effect of position is found in the description of Tom:

> He was a sturdy, straw haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body. (Fitzgerald 11)

The poise and posture emitted power, but this power would not be as striking without Tom’s dominant eyes; the facial expressions give the posture additional convincing power. For Tom this came naturally from his old money breeding, but
for Jay, this power would be accessed through his own natural charisma, study, and practice.

In her book *Advanced Elocution*, Shoemaker gives three steps in increasing the power of facial expressions. First, one must be employed in “relaxing the facial muscles.” Also, one should “allow some mood or fancy to dominate the mind.” Finally, a third means is to practice “exercises of short passages of prose or verse, which embody various sentiments.” “These traces once habitually fixed, remain in all their softness and charm, through every varying stages of life” (Shoemaker 261).

In studying how to attain this certain countenance, Jay Gatz practiced till perfection. The narrator, Nick, is immediately drawn to Gatsby's facial expressions. “He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it [. . .]. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor” (Fitzgerald 52).

Step Three: “Your gesture should be graceful, appropriate, free, forceful, and natural” (Kleiser 86).

Through the unwavering determination of Jim Gatz, Jay Gatsby was created. Gatsby claimed and looked the part of old money: “His tanned skin was drawn attractively tight on his face and his short hair looked as though it were trimmed everyday” (Fitzgerald 54). But as one spends more time with Gatsby, certain actions unconsciously begin to emerge in his conversational patterns, betraying his new money origin.

The first witness that tips Nick toward this fictitious façade is the uncontrollable gestures Jay Gatsby makes. Fitzgerald has Nick observe a certain quality, which “was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (68).

Shoemaker teaches that gestures are effective only when used correctly. For example, the “hand vertical (palm outward, fingertips upward,) is evasive, repellent, aversive” while the index finger “may be used in discriminating, and forcible asserting” (Shoemaker 257). But in the case of Jay Gatsby, the tapping foot and moving fingers would be considered “unmeaning, angular, abrupt, [. . .] stilted, [and] amateurish” gestures; such gestures must be avoided (Kleiser 86). In such instances, it would have been better to “allow the voice alone to express the sentiment than to have the attention distracted by the manner” (Shoemaker 253).

Step Four: “Nothing betrays a man so unmistakably as his style of conversation” (Kleiser 142).

The style of conversation is comprised of three main components: the quality of the voice, the word choice, and the expression of ideas. The first step in mastering the elocution of the rich is to find the perfect voice. Such a voice is described by experts as being “neither high nor low in pitch,” “agreeable to the listening ear,”
and should be “musical and well-modulated” (Kleiser 58). These qualities found in effective voices aptly describe Fitzgerald’s character Daisy. “[H]er voice sang” (20); “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 [. . .]. High in the white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl” (127). Daisy’s voice of perfection could not have been taught. In being raised in the old money environment, this elocution was not learned, nor practiced; it was instinctively performed.

Another important aspect of conversation is word choice. In every self-help elocution manual, several chapters are dedicated in helping the student know, understand, and apply proper word choice. “It is difficult to overestimate the power of words. With them we command, we supplicate, we defy, we convince, we condemn, we conciliate” (Kleiser 62).

To successfully express one’s self through words, one must increase one’s vocabulary; “with ten thousand words at his command he should be able to express himself with greater precision and effectiveness” (Kleiser 62). This is done by “constantly learning new words through books we read” (Fogerty 12). With each new word encountered, the meaning should be understood, the spelling memorized, and the knowledge of the proper use in a conversation solidified. This concept was grasped by Jim Gatz at an earlier age and stayed with him throughout his life. In the daily schedule given to Nick by Jay’s father, one hour is reserved for the “practice of elocution” and to the reading of “one improving book or magazine per week” (Fitzgerald 181–82). In so doing, his vocabulary would have increased immensely.

Though years of study may have provided Gatsby with a fount of knowledge, he never mastered the application of old money language; there was always something unnatural about his word choice, a slight accent in his elocution. Gatsby’s first impression enthralled Nick. Almost taken into the dream of Gatsby, Jay’s word choice soon gave him away:

[His smile] believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself [. . .]. Precisely at that point it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. Some time before he introduced himself I’d got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care. (Fitzgerald 53)

With the saturation of speech throughout the society during the 1920s, F. Scott Fitzgerald used the old money standard of elocution to help the reader and the characters see past the lie that was Jay Gatsby.

Gatsby’s word choice contained a “rough-neck” accent, which affected the expression of his ideas (i.e., distinct articulation and correct pronunciation, coupled with proper use of current vogue phrases). This seemed only to help brand Jay as lower class.

In order to articulate clearly and to properly enunciate, one must become a student of the dictionary, avidly researching the phonetics, stress, and inflection of
each word. To help in this study, a strong personal resolution to “never use an incorrect, an inelegant, or a vulgar phrase or word” (Kleiser 37) is required.

Though one must master such enunciation, it is more important to “avoid using expressions which are not current in society, although they may be of common occurrence in books” (Kleiser 38). If this form of expression is not mastered, one simply will not be able to break down the linguistic barriers of the established wealth. In conversation, the use of obsolete phrases is not only hard to amend, but this faulty expression is also indicative of an attempt to be old money. “Its effect is bad, for though it is not like slang, vulgar in itself, it betrays an effort to conceal vulgarity” (38).

Fitzgerald must have been aware of the elocution standard and the difficult task of mastering it. At one point, Fitzgerald depicts Jay Gatsby attempting to convince Nick of his old money status, but this attempt falls extremely short. The expression of ideas, distinct articulation, gestures and word choice ultimately reveal him for who he is—a rough-neck trying hard to claim old money status.

Fitzgerald places Nick alone with Gatsby on the way to New York. In this scene, Gatsby confesses his past to Nick. “I’ll tell you God’s truth [. . .]. I am the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford” (Fitzgerald 69). Jay Gatsby claims that he is old money, but as the conversation continues, Nick observes obvious mistakes in Jay’s elocution; he is ‘mispronouncing’ several modes of standard expression.

The first errors Fitzgerald attributes to Gatsby are poor word choice (or the lack thereof) and inappropriate gestures. “We hadn’t reached West Egg Village before Gatsby began leaving his elegant sentences unfinished and slapping himself indecisively on the knee” (69). The forcing of elegant words left Gatsby speechless, finishing many of his sentences with the slapping of his knee.

As the conversation progresses, Gatsby begins to hurry many of his phrases, allowing his articulation to falter. The slurring and mumbling of certain words taint the façade Gatsby was trying to create. “He looked at me sideways—and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying. He hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford,’ or swallowed it or choked on it as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces and I wondered if there wasn’t something a little sinister about him after all” (69).

With doubts already entering the mind of the narrator, Gatsby’s raw and estranged accent serves only to reinforce these thoughts as Jay continually uses obsolete phrases. In so doing, the worst mistake of elocution is made—the misuse of “expressions which are not current in society” (Kleiser 38). Nick writes, “With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned ‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne” (Fitzgerald 70).
Fitzgerald proves to the audience that even the most self-disciplined young man could not break the language barrier that society had created. Even though Gatsby dedicated years to the study of elocution, he simply could not master the language of the established upper class.

Questions then arise. Why wasn’t Jay Gatsby successful in his attempt to enter the elite upper class? What makes old money elocution so difficult to perfect? The answer is simple. Just as language is learned by children through imitation, so is the elocution and expression taught by example. Elsie Fogerty in her book *Speech Craft* proves this point perfectly:

If we come from a very small place which has been a good deal cut off from the rest of the country, we may have kept peculiar terms of speech, peculiar movements, even words which are not in general use. When we go out into the world […] people who hear us speak will not think about what we are saying, they will be listening only to the curious way in which we say it. (5)

Therefore it is a matter of accident “whether we speak well or badly” (Fogerty 4). As one grows in his environment, the patterns of speech and expression are unconsciously ingrained into our being. Though one may learn new elocution, there may still reside an unnatural accent revealing one’s true origin. To achieve perfect expression, one must be born and bred. “In the conversation of well-bred children we find the most interesting and helpful illustrations of unaffected speech. The exquisite modulation of the voice, the unstudied correctness of emphasis, and the sincerity and depth of feeling might serve as a model for older speakers” (Kleiser 94).

This saturation of elocution in the 1920s created social barriers, which secured and solidified the old money as the nation’s elite. With the increase in technology, this long-established upper class increased their visibility, personal interactions, and set the standard for successful self-expression. Though many individuals became wealthy, they could not break the linguistic barrier. For example, Jay Gatsby accumulated money, but his rough-neck accent prohibited acceptance among the old money. Whether a wandering gesture, unnatural phrasing, or poor word choice, “what you are prevents me from hearing what you say” (Kleiser 66). The elocution expert Fogerty summarized this philosophy best: “By your use of the living word men will know whence you have come” (112). And that it did. Daisy’s voice was “full of money” (Fitzgerald 127), while Gatsby’s hollowed elocution ended where it began, in the humble dusts of the earth.
Works Cited


