Original Paper

Syntactic Markedness as a Stylistic Feature in *the Great Gatsby*

Longxing Wei[1*]

[1] Department of Linguistics, Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA

[*] Longxing Wei, Department of Linguistics, Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA

Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic code choices of Francis Stott Fitzgerald for one of his masterpieces: The Great Gatsby. It hypothesizes that as a linguistic virtuoso, Fitzgerald exploits marked linguistic choices to convey his intentional meaning throughout the novel. "Marked" linguistic choices are defined as departures from the expected or the norm to negotiate a change during a discourse. This study assumes that the writer who is a linguistic virtuoso will "mark" the crucial passages (i.e., the passages which carry the author's most important messages) by using marked syntactic structures and certain grammatical categories to set them off from the rest of the work. The study aims to find whether Fitzgerald marks the crucial narrative passages in The Great Gatsby by using particular syntactic structures which are demonstratively different from the typical narrative passages in the novel as a whole. To do so, it analyzes five passages which are crucial in carrying the "authorial message", and these passages differ syntactically from five matched passages which largely function only to carry the story line forward. The stylistic analysis rests on a frequency count of the major components of the phrase structure and the most important grammatical categories in the paired paragraphs. Based on the analytical results, this study reaches the conclusion that the syntactic markedness stands out as a stylistic feature in The Great Gatsby, and such a stylistic feature can only become salient beyond surface-level considerations of phrase structure and grammatical categories in any stylistic analysis of literary works.

Keywords

markedness, marked, unmarked, crucial, syntactic, phrase structure, linguistic, thematic role

1. Introduction

Francis Scott Fitzgerald, an American novelist and short-story writer, is considered one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. He was also widely known as the literary spokesman of the "jazz age" and one of the most personal authors. His novels include as *This Side of Paradise, The Great Gatsby, The Saturday Evening Post, The Offshore Pirate, Bernice Bobs Her Hair, May Day, The Diamond as Big as the Ritz, The Lost Decade, Emotional Bankruptcy, and Tender is the Night*. He spent his last years as a script writer in Hollywood, California. He suffered a heart attack and died in 1940 at the age of 44. He left an unfinished novel about Hollywood entitled *The Last Tycoon*. Unfortunately, Fitzgerald's did not earn the recognition it deserved until years after his death. He died believing that he was a complete failure.

One of Fitzgerald's masterpieces includes *The Great Gatsby*, which is a devastating portrait of the so-called American Dream where success and love are measured in terms of money. Although he was an alcoholic, Fitzgerald wrote sober. He often centered on morally weak characters prone to heavy drinking and talking. The lives of the mad, morally bankrupt characters in Fitzgerald's works led lives that closely resembled his own. He wrote with a clear, colorful, lyrical style. The major themes of Fitzgerald's works are aspiration and mutability.

Nine decades ago, *The Great Gatsby* was published in America. Many scholars of American literature can recite its final lines: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther... And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past". Gatsby was a romantic who was fatally attracted to Daisy, whose voice, Fitzgerald wrote, "sounded like money".

One reason Fitzgerald's prose is valued is his evocative metaphors, for example, his writing that "Gatsby believed in the green light" or that Daisy's voice "sounded like money". This study, however, provides a linguistic analysis of a less obvious aspect of Fitzgerald's style, the syntax of those narrative passages which most obviously carry his "message". It claims that Fitzgerald made sure, through the syntactic structures which he employed, whether consciously or unconsciously, that his "crucial passages" would stand out as "the figure in the carpet".

This study is the investigation of the linguistic code choices of persons who can be identified as "linguistic virtuosos". Linguistic virtuosos are speakers or writers who are among those persons whose careers depend to a great extent on their use of language. For example, novelists, poets, and essayists, but also public speakers, such as politicians, religious leaders, trial lawyers and radio and TV talk show hosts, can be identified as linguistic virtuosos, because they receive public recognition as most successful at their trade. Fitzgerald, of course, can be considered a linguistic virtuoso. Linguistic virtuosos succeed partially because of their abilities to exploit linguistic choices at all levels of language: phonological choices, lexical choices and syntactic choices.

2. Linguistic Markedness as a General Hypothesis

One of the effective analytical methods in stylistic analysis of literary works is to explore for underlying linguistic patterns below the surface configurations of language. What becomes important is to search for the linguistic codes which the author employs to express his/her intended meaning. "If a text is regarded in objective simplicity as a sequence of symbols on paper, then the modern linguist's scrutiny is not just a matter of looking at the text, but of looking through the text to its significance" (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 5). Thus, the aim of literary stylistics is to relate the literary appreciation with the linguistic observation by moving "to and fro from linguistic details to the literary 'centre' of a work or a writer's art" (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 13). As assumed, literary stylistics investigates the relation between a writer's outstanding artistic achievement and the salient linguistic features through which it is achieved. "Such salient features of style may be called STYLE MARKERS" (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 69), which are manifest as the "unusual" linguistic characteristics in relation to the significance of a text.

Thus, to achieve the aim of literary stylistics, we need to know how the linguistic features are to be selected for analysis, that is, how style markers are identified for analysis. Following the heuristic notion of "style marker" with some modification, this study identifies the salient or unusual linguistic features by contrast with those which are non-salient or usual in the same text. In other words, style markers or significant features of style can only be identified against those which are less significant or insignificant to a relative degree. As a stylistic method, this study exploits the notion of "linguistic markedness" as a general hypothesis: Linguistic virtuosos will exploit "marked" linguistic choices to convey intentional meaning in their discourse. In brief, marked choices are departures from the expected or the norm, given the social situation or the genre involved. While language users everywhere have tacit knowledge of a markedness continuum (Myers-Scotton, 1993), what choices are more unmarked or marked is both community-specific and interaction-specific. Speakers and writers make marked choices to negotiate a change (Wei, 1998, 2016).

Linguistic virtuosos may use marked choices in various ways. The hypothesis of this study is that writers who are linguistic virtuosos will "mark" the crucial passages in their works by using marked structures to set them off from the rest of the work. The more specific hypothesis studied here is this: Fitzgerald marks the crucial narrative passages in *The Great Gatsby* by using syntactic structures which are demonstrably different from the typical narrative passages in the novel as a whole. That is, the hypothesis is that the crucial passages will be syntactically marked. By "crucial passages" is meant those paragraphs which literary critics identify as "carrying the author's message". In the case of *The Great Gatsby*, consulted by the leading Fitzgerald scholar, Matthew Bruccoli (personal communication), five of these narrative paragraphs were identified as marked. These were paired with five nearby narrative paragraphs showing syntactic structures which were determined as representative of most narrative passages in the novel. These were identified as unmarked. The initial object of this study was

to compare these unmarked passages with the crucial passages in order to test the hypothesis that the crucial passages indeed could be defined as marked in their syntactic structures.

3. Independent Motivations for the Hypothesis

This hypothesis is motivated by previous theories in literary stylistics, as well as by several linguistic theories of discourse structure. Speaking of marked structures is reminiscent of the notion of "foregrounding". Foregrounding is Garvin's (1964) translation from the Czech term *aktualisace* used by the Prague School linguists, and its application to literature derives from an analogy with what is thought to be "a fundamental characteristic of human perception" (Van Peer, 1986, p. 21), namely the ability to distinguish "a figure against a ground". The notion of foregrounding has its roots in the work of the Russian Formalists, notably Viktor Shklovsky. As he argued (quoted in Van Peer, 1986, p. 1), the function of art is to make people aware of the world in a fresh way, and a device for achieving this is "defamiliarization" or "making strange". In Shklovsky's own words, "... (art) exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart a sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky, 1917, p. 12). The way to make the world strange through text is by foregrounding certain aspects or features of it, the idea being that certain aspects of a work can be made to stand out, be foregrounded, that a form of linguistic highlighting can be achieved through breaking the norms of the standard language. That is, certain types of structure are foregrounded: foregrounding implies perceptual salience for readers, a pointer to areas of significance. One of the problems with the Russian formalists and the Prague structuralists, however, was a failure to identify what would count or not count as defamiliarization or foregrounding. Still, many literary critics today use these concepts as a tool in their analyses.

The hypothesis about marked syntactic structures in discourse is also motivated by Longacre's discussion of "discourse peaks". Longacre and his students, often missionaries connected with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, championed the need for basing grammatical analysis on discourse samples long before discourse analysis as we know it today became popular. In many different places, Longacre discusses the "conspiracy of features" found in and around peaks of climactic points in a discourse, stating that they either function in "packing the event line" or in "slowing the camera down" (1985, pp. 85-86). He lists ten structural features which accomplish these functions. These include rhetorical underlining by means of repetition and paraphrase, heightened vividness by a tense shift or a person shift, or dramatic shifts toward action with many more verbs than found in other passages. Biber's (1988) analysis of textual dimensions in speech and writing also was consulted. According to Biber, linguistic dimensions can be discovered to account for the variation among a set of texts. It is assumed that strong co-occurrence patterns of linguistic features mark underlying functional

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dimensions. Since linguistic features do not randomly co-occur in texts, it is the underlying functional influence that encourages their use.

A final motivation for this hypothesis comes from the markedness model of Myers-Scotton (1993). She claims that underlying the indexical quality of choices of one variety rather than another (whether a language, dialect, or style) is their markedness readings. Her argument is that the value of the varieties in regard to markedness for a particular interaction type is what motivates speakers to include different varieties in their speech.

4. Analysis

Recall that the hypothesis predicts that a comparison of five passages containing "crucial messages" with five passages whose contribution is more only to develop the story line will show different syntactic patterns in the two sets. The two sets of passages were selected and paired up in the following ways: (1) The unmarked matching paragraph was taken from neighboring pages of its "crucial" matching paragraph. (2) Each pair was matched as closely as possible in regard to subject matter. (3) Each pair has about the same number of words. The longest crucial paragraph has 101 words and the shortest one has 80 words.

In order to generate a set of syntactic categories (e.g., CP, IP, VP, NP, and PP) to be compared across the two types of passages, detailed syntactic trees of the sentences were drawn. The difference in the trees of the two types of passages was immediately striking. Most obvious was that the trees for the "crucial" passages simply had more "foliage"; that is, the sentences were not only longer, but also included more hierarchical branching. At this point, therefore, it was already obvious that the hypothesis predicting a difference in the passages would be supported. Our research question now became: What syntactic features account for the different profiles of the trees?

Categories for further analysis were generated mainly simply by scrutinizing the trees, but also by considering the categories which Longacre had identified as characterizing discourse peaks and which Biber had found useful. Frequencies of these four main categories were studied in each of the marked and unmarked sample passages: (1) INFL Phrases (IPs) (i.e., simple sentences) (Although all IPs can be regarded as root CPs in terms of the syntactic tree structure, for the purpose of the current study, if the C position is vacuous in the tree, the sentence is counted as being "simple"); (2) Complement Phrases (CPs) (i.e., complex sentences containing either subordinate or embedded clauses or both); (3) Prepositional Phrases (PPs); and (4) types of verbs. In addition, these features were studied: (1) configurations of Noun Phrases (NPs); (2) conjunctions as links for IPs vs. links for NPs and other XPs, such as Verb Phrases (VPs), Adjective Phrases (APs), and Prepositional Phrases (PPs); and (3) participial functions.

5. Results and Discussion

As already indicated, the specific hypothesis that five "crucial" passages would show different syntactic patterns from five "unmarked" passages in *The Great Gatsby* was supported. From now on, therefore, we refer to the crucial passages interchangeably as "marked". The results have shown that many of the main differences have to do with syntactic tree configurations. The following tables are for the frequency counts and comparisons of the items for the study.

Incidence of CPs. There are many more CPs in the marked passages than the unmarked ones, 31 to 15 Under CP were included subordinate clauses, such as adverbial complements when I came back from the East last autumn and sentence complements I felt CP (that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever); and also embedded clauses, such as which is dignified under the name of the creative temperament in the marked passage. Below is one of the marked passages. Also, see **Figure 1** for a phrase structure tree for a sentence from this marked passage.

A marked passage (*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1991 ed., pp. 5-6):

CP (When I came back from the East last autumn) I felt **CP** (that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever); I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man **CP** (who gives his name to this book), was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby **CP** (who represented everything) **CP** (for which I have an unaffected scorn). **CP** (If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures), then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, **CP** (as if he were related to one of those intricate machines) **CP** (that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away). This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability **CP** (which is dignified under the name of the "creative temperament")—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness **CP** (such as I have never found in any other person) and **CP** (which is not likely I shall ever find again). No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is **CP** (what preyed upon Gatsby), **CP** (what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams) **CP** (that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men).

Incidence of IPs. The marked passages use almost twice as many "IP and IP" constructions than the unmarked ones—but, at 7 vs. 4, the frequencies are not large enough to give us confidence this ratio would stand across a larger corpus. For example, a sentence in the marked passage shows three "IP and IP" constructions. These are schematized in a simplified phrase structure tree under **Figure 2**. The IPs in question are: The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun; now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music; and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. These IPs are joined by the conjunction and. In contrast, in the unmarked passages, this conjunction tends to link, not IPs, but rather NPs or other XPs, such as VPs, APs, and PPs. For example, in the unmarked passages there are 13 instances of NP-and-NP constructions vs. 4 in the crucial passages.

Incidence of PPs. While the unmarked passages show more Prepositional Phrases (PPs) than the

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marked passages, 56 vs. 50, the marked passages use PPs more to show "process", "direction", or "manner" of activity or action, while the unmarked passages tend to use more PPs to indicate "state or condition", "time" or "place/location". For example, consider the PPs in a sentence from the marked passage: The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reaches the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. These appear in the tree diagrams under **Figure 3** and clearly show "process" and "manner". Compare these with the PPs in a sentence from the unmarked passage under **Figure 4**: The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Vill in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and garden.

Incidence and Type of Verbs. There are more verbs in the marked passages, 73 vs. 58. What is more interesting, however, is that the marked passages contain more successive verbs or verbs in sequence. For example, look at the phrase structure tree under **Figure 5** for a sentence from the marked passage. The marked passages also show many more verbs which might be called phrasal verbs. True, it is difficult to define a phrasal verb absolutely. Rather than try to decide where such a verb ends, Hopper (1993), for example, simply refers to all potential candidates as "multiply articulated verbal expressions". For an example of the problem, consider the verb in this clause, which is dignified under the name of the "creative temperament". Is the verb simply is dignified, or is it is dignified under? We defined phrasal verbs in two ways. First, the category includes those verbs followed by particles which cannot easily be separated from the main verb by a parenthetical intrusion (e.g., pull out and stretch out in this fragment from a marked passage: when we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us ...). Second, the category also includes those verbs with complements whose thematic role is narrowly ascribed. This definition allows us to include such verbs as is dignified, since its complement must be a PP headed by either by or with. Under these two criteria, of the 73 verbs in the marked passages, 36 are phrasal verbs. This means that one out of every two verbs are phrasal verbs. In contrast, in the unmarked passages, out of 58 verbs, only 14 are phrasal verbs, or one in four. Hopper (1993) has remarked that, in contrast to simple transitive verbs, which suggest backgrounded or unwitnessed events, "multiply articulated verbal expressions" suggest an authorial perspective on the action—that is, experienced or witnessed details. Because phrasal verbs may be considered as icons of an "unfolding", their presence is consistent with a view of narrative as at times constructive rather than just reportorial. If phrasal verbs carry such intentional meanings, it would be predicted that more of them should occur when the author is giving his/her perspective on events. This is just what is found in the crucial passages, of course.

Table 1. Comparisons: Modifying CPs, IPs, NP & NP

	Crucial/Marked passages (words: 736)		Unmarked passages (words: 751)		
Category	N	%	N	%	$X^2 =$
CPs	31	4.2	15	1.9	*5.564 (p .025)
IPs	7	0.95	4	0.53	0.362^{YC}
NP & NP (& NP)	4	0.54	13	1.7	*3.764^{YC}
					(p .10)

N = number of tokens; % = proportion of category tokens expressed as a percentage of word total; 1 df; .10 and .025 = the probability level; ^{YC} = Yates' Correction applied; * = significant.

Table 2. Comparisons: PPs, Class I PPs, Class II PPs

	Crucial/Marked passages (words: 736)		Unmarked passages (words: 751)		
Category	N	%	N	%	$X^2 =$
PPs	73	9.9	81	10.7	0.414
Class I PPs (process, manner, direction)	31	4.2	6	0.79	*16.89 (p .001)
Class II PPs (condition, time, location)	20	2.7	50	6.6	*12.856 (p .001)

N = number of tokens; % = proportion of category tokens expressed as a percentage of word total; 1 df; .001 = the probability level; * = significant.

Table 3. Comparisons: Vs, Phrasal Verbs

	Crucial/Marked passages (words: 736)		Unmarked passages (words: 751)		
Category	N	%	N	%	$X^2 =$
Vs	**73**	**9.9**	**58**	**7.7**	**1.716**
Phrasal Verbs	**26**	**3.5**	**7**	**0.9**	*10.938
					(p .001)
Ratio (PVs to Vs)	1:2.8		1:8.28		

N = number of tokens; % = proportion of category tokens expressed as a percentage of word total; 1 df; .001 = the probability level; * = significant.

From the point of view of overall sentence structure, what is most striking is the incidence of CP-chaining and conjoined IP constructions in the crucial or marked paragraphs. Producing a number of CPs and IPs within a single sentence makes the sentence more "thoughtful". But how is this accomplished? First, a sentence can be characterized as containing the predicate argument structure which will accomplish and satisfy minimal thematic role projections. Thematic roles include agent,

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patient, beneficiary, locative, among others. That is, a sentence must include a V which will specify internal thematic role requirements. Also, it must include the necessary NPs to satisfy the thematic roles projected by the V and VP. Rather than satisfy thematic role requirements, APs and PPs elaborate on already projected thematic roles; in this way, they differ from NPs. Now, CPs and IPs express thematic role requirements by containing both VPs and NPs; in fact, each sentence can be viewed as a CP which necessarily projects an IP. When there is more than one CP or IP in a sentence, some of these CPs and IPs are like NPs in that they satisfy thematic role requirements; for example, a sentential complement may function as a patient (e.g., that the rain falls mainly on the plain as in I think that the rain falls mainly on the plain). But others which are not part of the argument projection of the main verb "create" more thematic roles (e.g., when I came back from the East last autumn in the first sentence in the marked passage). More importantly, all additional CPs and IPs create additional propositions.

Now, any multiplication of phrases, whether CPs and IPs or NPs or even APs and adverbials—whether PPs or not—creates new information and therefore "slows down the action", thereby making the passage more "memorable". The difference is that the information created by CPs or IPs is of a different order: new propositions are created. In the case of modifiers, the new information is simply an elaboration on a proposition. In the case of multiple NPs, the elaboration is slightly different, but still it is only an elaboration. That is, in an NP-and-NP construction, only one thematic role projection is still satisfied, even though there are multiple NPs. For example, look at the phrase structure tree under **Figure 6** for a sentence from the unmarked passage. For this reason, a multiplication of CPs and IPs within a single sentence makes that sentence especially "reflective": it does not just add information, it adds propositions.

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away.
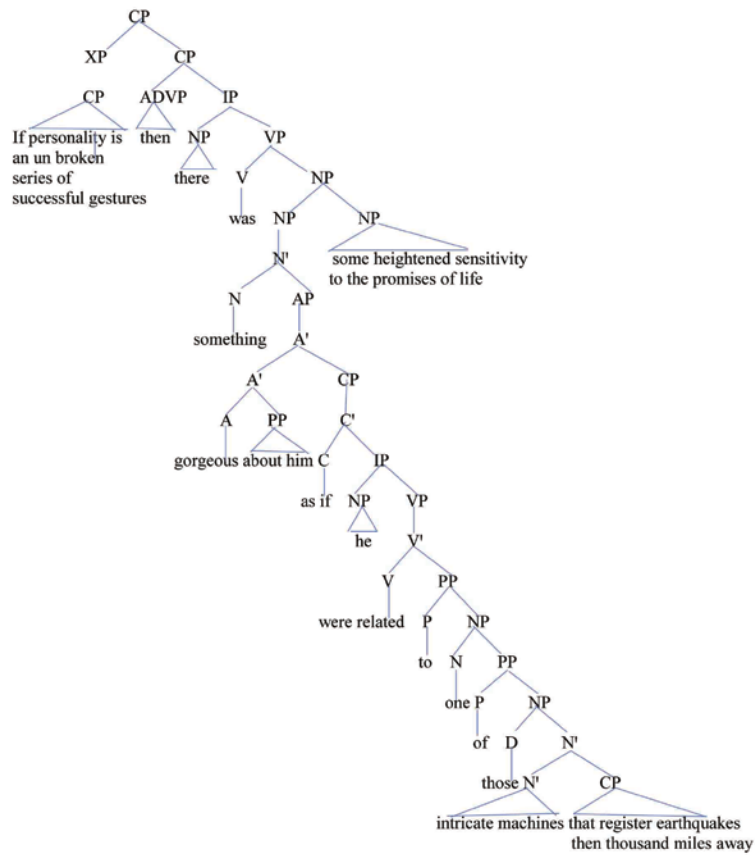
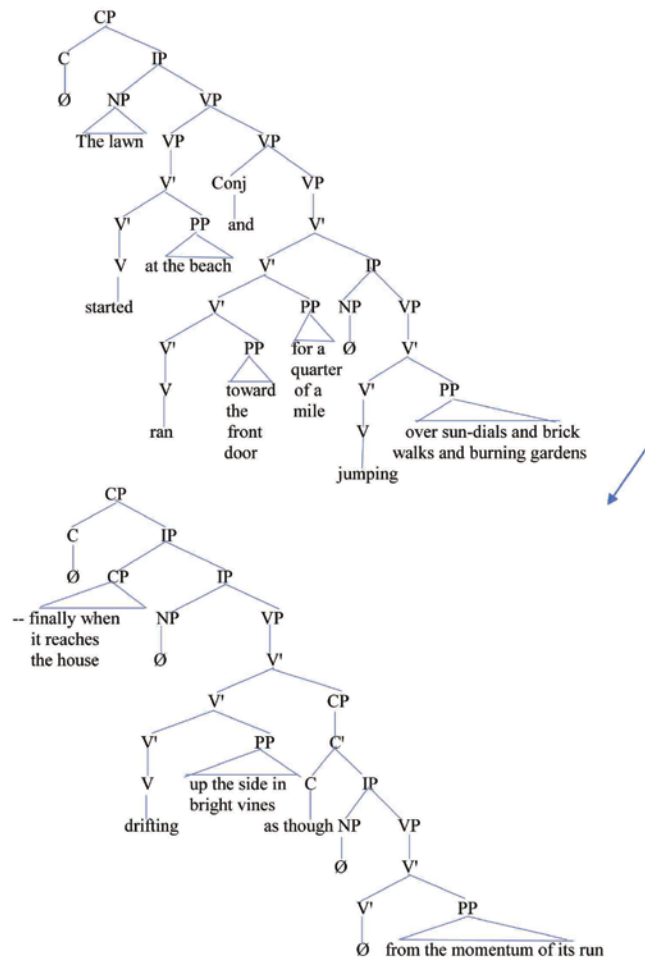**Figure 1. Phrase Structure Tree for a Sentence from a Crucial/Marked Passage**

Note.The root CP is not included in the count of modifying CPs.

The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music and the opera of voices pitches a key high.
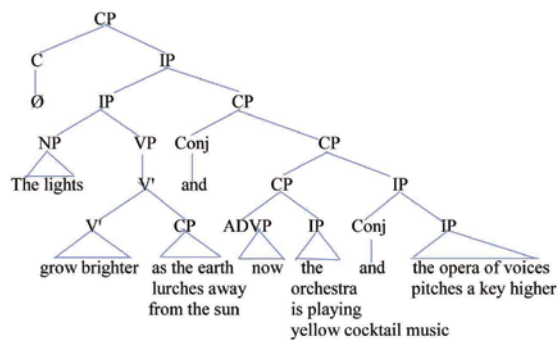
Figure 2. Phrase Structure Tree for a Sentence from a Crucial/Marked Passage

The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run.

Figure 3. Phrase Structure Tree for a Sentence from a Crucial/Marked Passage

The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and garden.
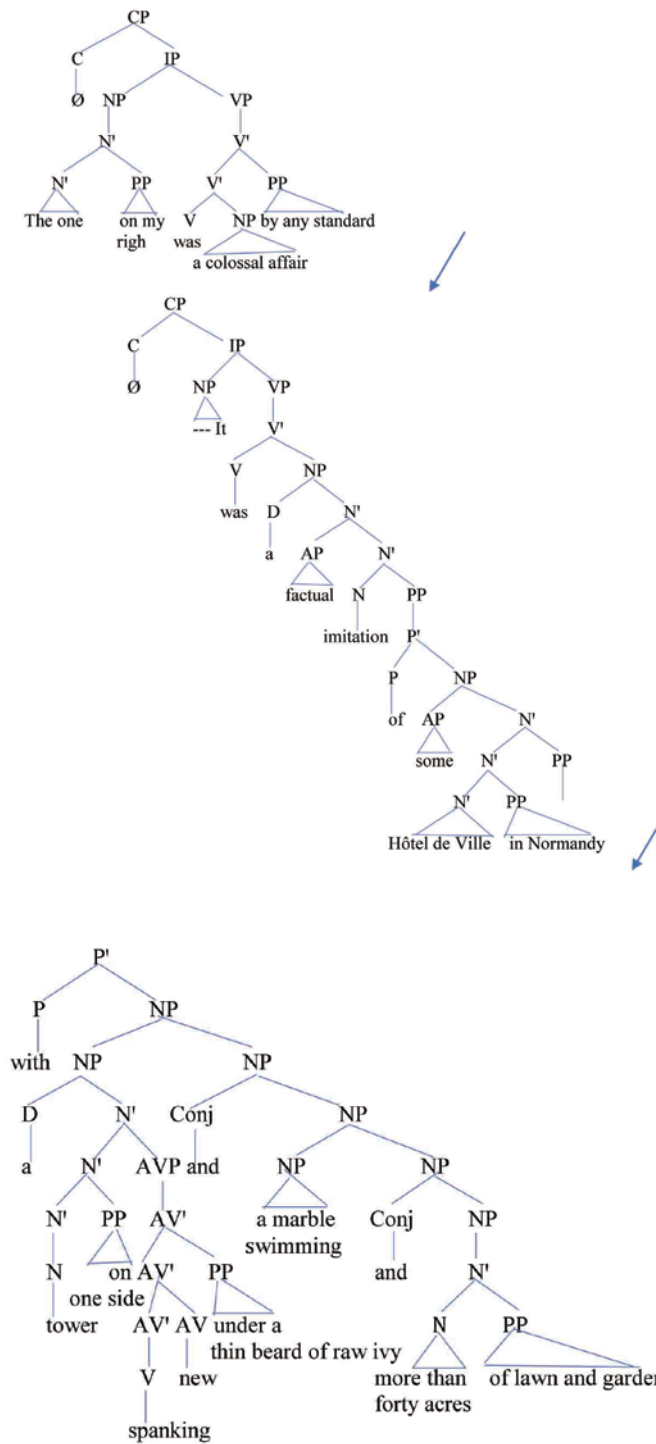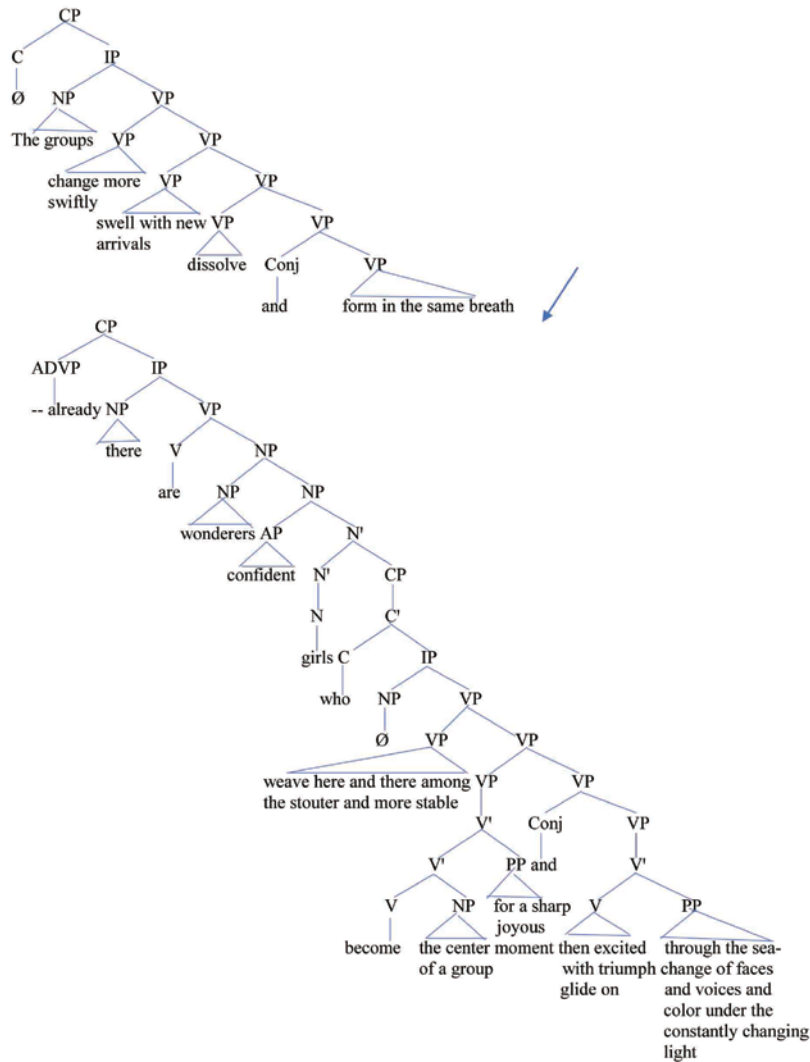
Figure 4. Phrase Structure Tree for a Sentence from an Unmarked Passage

The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath—already there are wonderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the center of a group and then excited with triumph glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light.

Figure 5. Phrase Structure Tree for a Sentence from a Crucial/Marked Passage

I remember the fur coats of the girls returning from Miss This or That's and the chatter of frozen breath and the hands waving overhead as we caught sight of old acquaintances and the matchings of invitations: "Are you going to the Ordways'? the Herseys'? the Schultzes'?" and the long green tickets clasped tight in our gloved hands.
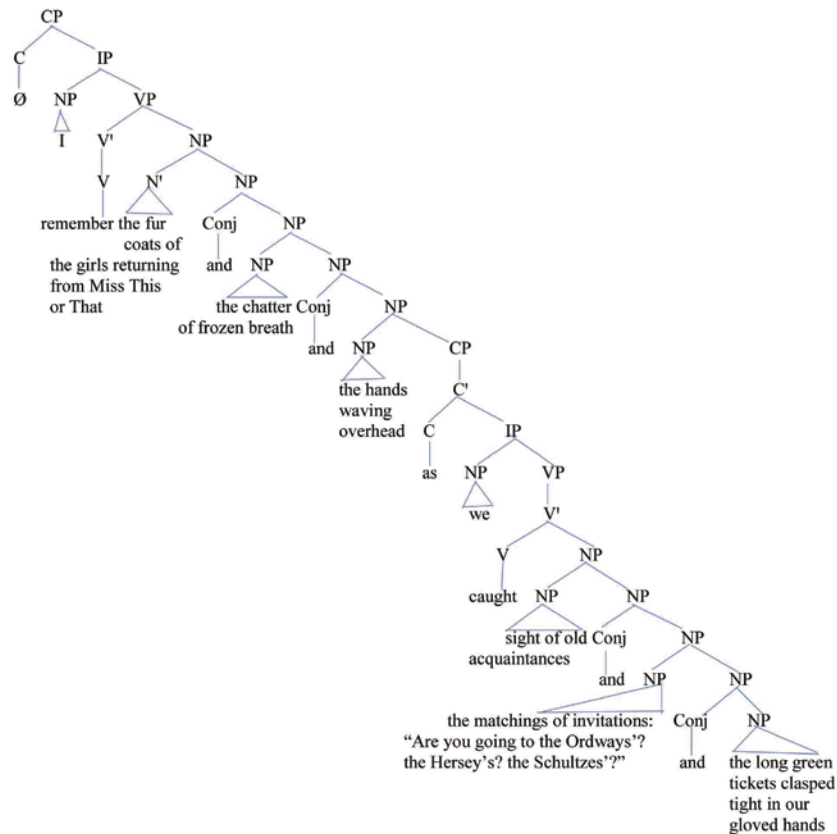
Figure 6. Phrase Structure Tree for a Sentence from an Unmarked Passage

6. Conclusion

This study has provided evidence that in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* five passages which are "crucial" in carrying the "authorial message" differ syntactically from five matched passages which largely function only to carry the story line forward. This conclusion rests on a frequency count of the major components of phrases structure in paired paragraphs, such as their incidence of conjoined IPs, as well as a count of certain grammatical categories, such as phrasal verbs. To reach the most telling part of the analysis, however, that the very propositional weight of the types of passages differs, one must go beyond surface-level considerations of phrase structure and grammatical categories. Operating at a more abstract level, this analysis rests on a theory of argument structure and thematic role assignment. Such a theory is a level of abstraction above that of the surface level and is part of most current theories of grammatical structure; within Government and Binding theory, this is called theta theory. In this regard, this analysis suggests that more work under the rubric "discourse analysis" will find explanations for "stylistic effects" or "pragmatic force" by employing the more lexically-based aspects of current models of grammatical structure. That is, there has been an undue emphasis on components at the level of phrase structure.

Finally, since the goal of this study has been to show that Fitzgerald makes use of marked syntactic

structures at certain points, let us comment further on the function of marked choices. It has been argued that all linguistic choices are socially or psychologically motivated (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Wei, 1998, 2016). So considered, marked choices function as negotiations to change either the speaker/writer's previously-established persona, or the interpersonal relationship with other participants. Is it a stretch of the imagination to claim that the marked choices which novelists make are socially or psychologically motivated? To answer that question fully is beyond the scope of this study. Here, suffice it to say that for novelists, such as Fitzgerald, marked choices, at the very least, draw attention to themselves and also the content they convey. In so doing this, they clearly signal a higher degree of authorial involvement at this point; for the author, the story line becomes secondary to something else which is happening. In this way, marked stylistic choices are negotiations to change the writer's relationship with the reader. It is in this sense that one can argue that marked choices in a novel are also socially or psychologically motivated.

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