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Analysis of Archaism and Slang Usage in Literary and Film Discourse

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Abstract: This study examines the use of archaic vocabulary (archaisms) and slang in literary discourse and film discourse, using F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925) and its 2013 film adaptation directed by Baz Luhrmann as a case study. Drawing on stylistic and linguistic analysis, the research identifies twelve archaic lexemes and four slang terms in the novel's text, and investigates which of these were retained or altered in the film's dialogue. The study contributes to adaptation studies and stylistics by illustrating how linguistic features (archaism and slang) are handled across different media, reflecting broader differences between literary and cinematic discourse.

Keywords: Discourse, literary discourse, film discourse, film adaptation, archaism, slang.

Introduction: Language in literary works often significantly differs from language in their film adaptations, especially in vocabulary and style. Literary texts have the freedom to use rare or archaic words, complex narration, and period-specific slang to create a rich sense of time, place, and character voice. Film discourse, on the other hand, tends to be more constrained by the need for immediate audience comprehension and the naturalism of spoken dialogue. Adapting a novel into a film thus involves not only condensing the plot but also transforming the language, from the page to the screen, in ways that may alter or simplify certain linguistic features.

One aspect of this transformation is how archaisms (old-fashioned words or expressions) and slang are handled. Archaisms in a novel can lend it a historical flavor or formal tone, while slang can inject informality, realism, or period flavor into characters' speech. When translating literary discourse into film discourse,

directors and screenwriters must decide which of these elements to retain for authenticity and which to modify for clarity and pacing. An illustrative example is F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel The Great Gatsby (1925), renowned for its Jazz Age setting and distinctive language. Fitzgerald's text includes both archaisms—such as the iconic phrase "old sport" and 1920s slang and colloquialisms that ground the story in its era. In 2013, Baz Luhrmann's film adaptation of The Great Gatsby reinterpreted the novel for a modern audience, raising questions about how the film handles these archaic and slang elements.

Literature Review

Literary Discourse and Film Discourse. "Literary discourse" in this context refers to the language of written narratives (novels, stories), which often features elaborate descriptions, narratorial commentary, and a lexicon that can include uncommon or stylistically marked words. "Film discourse" refers to the language used in films, primarily spoken dialogue and voice-over narration, combined with visual storytelling. The two media impose different constraints and possibilities on language use. In literary discourse, readers can re-read and ponder text at their own pace, allowing authors to employ complex sentences, archaic diction, or dense allusions without risking immediate incomprehension. In film discourse, however, dialogue must be comprehended in real time as the film plays, and it typically strives to sound natural to the ear. Kozloff notes that film dialogue is crafted to simulate spontaneous speech and must communicate character and plot information efficiently, given time constraints and the presence of visuals [7;56] As a result, screenwriters often simplify or modernize language compared to the source material.

Adaptation theorists have observed that film adaptations frequently update or streamline the language of literary sources to appeal to contemporary audiences. Hutcheon emphasizes that adapters make conscious choices about what to preserve or change, balancing fidelity to the source with the norms and expectations of the new medium and audience [6;124-128] For example, a period novel may contain dialogue with antiquated manners of speaking that, if translated verbatim to film, could sound stilted or confuse viewers unfamiliar with that older form of English. Instead, filmmakers might retain a flavor of the period through a few key phrases or accents while using generally accessible language [6;132-135] Thus, studying specific elements like archaisms and slang in a novel-versus-film pair can reveal adaptation strategies: which linguistic details are considered essential for authenticity and which are downplayed or omitted for narrative clarity.

Archaisms and Their Stylistic Function. In literary and linguistic studies, archaisms are words, phrases, or grammatical forms that are perceived as very old-fashioned or obsolete, not in common use in contemporary language. They may have been common in earlier periods but sound antiquated to modern speakers [1;38] For instance, words like "thy" (for "your") or "whereupon" are archaisms in modern English usage. Archaisms can be deliberate stylistic devices: authors sometimes employ archaic diction to evoke a sense of a bygone era, to lend elevated or poetic tone, or to mimic the style of earlier texts [2;25] According to one linguistic scholar, archaisms function as a kind of historical color in a text, creating associations with past eras and enriching the cultural atmosphere [8;43] By using archaic words, a writer can give readers additional implicit information about context or character – for example, signaling that the story is set in or concerned with the past – and impart a certain solemnity or formality to the style. Archaisms often appear in historical novels, high fantasy, or poetic works to achieve these effects.

Slang. Slang refers to very informal, non-standard words or expressions that are often used in casual conversation rather than formal speech or writing. Slang typically emerges within particular social groups and carries a sense of novelty, irreverence, or rebellious tone [3;78] It is characterized by its ephemeral nature and its role in signaling in-group membership or contemporary, street-wise character [5;21-25] In other words, people use slang to create a feeling of informality, humor, or solidarity, and sometimes to express aggression or attitude that might be toned down in formal language. For example, saying "bucks" to mean dollars, or "copper" for policeman, or using a derogatory epithet, all mark speech as colloquial or substandard relative to formal norms. Slang enriches a language by introducing colorful metaphors, novel expressions, and a sense of contemporaneity – but it often loses currency quickly as trends change [3;82-85]

METHODS

This research employed a comparative qualitative content analysis focusing on the linguistic elements of archaism and slang in two texts: the original novel The Great Gatsby and its 2013 film adaptation. The approach is descriptive and analytical, aiming to catalogue specific lexemes in the source material and examine their treatment in the adaptation. By using a case study, the study provides detailed insights into how a particular set of linguistic features is handled across literary and cinematic discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing The Great Gatsby and its 2013 film adaptation, we found notable differences in the use of archaic and slang language between the literary and cinematic discourses. Table 1 summarizes the findings, listing the archaic lexemes and slang terms identified in the novel and indicating whether they were present (+) or absent/changed (-) in the film's dialogue or narration.

Table 1. Archaisms and Slang in the Novel vs. the 2013 Film

	Lexeme	***Novel (1925)***	***Film (2013)***
1	*Old sport*	+	+
2	*Caravansaroy*	+	-
3	*Caterwauling*	+	-
4	*Vinous*	+	+
5	*Gay/gayety*	+	-
6	*Whereupon*	+	-
7	*Hauteur*	+	-
8	*Rotograyure*	+	-
9	*Holocaust*	+	-
10	*Pasquinade*	+	-
11	*Knickerbockers*	+	-
12	*Whomsoever*	+	-
13	*Bucks (slang)*	+	-
14	*Rough-neck (slang)*	+	+
15	*Fellas (slang)*	+	-
16	*Swell (slang)*	+	-
17	*Kike (slang)*	+	+

From the above comparison, we observe that the novel's author used twelve archaic or archaic-sounding terms (including words with outdated meanings) and four notable slang terms (not counting minor colloquialisms) in the text. In the film adaptation, only two of the archaic terms clearly remain in spoken form (old sport and vinous), while the rest are not used. For slang, the film retains at most one of the four identified slang terms in similar context (rough-neck), though it also uses the slur "kike", a term present in the novel but not counted among the four common slangs as discussed below. These results highlight a trend: the film discourse significantly trims down the use of historically marked language (both archaisms and period-specific slang) compared to the literary discourse.

Archaisms. The vast majority of archaic lexemes from the novel do not appear in the film's dialogue or narration. This suggests that the screenwriters and director opted to modernize or simplify the language for viewers. Likely reasons include ensuring that contemporary audiences would understand the dialogue easily and maintaining a natural spoken flow in the script. Many of Fitzgerald's archaisms in the novel occur in narration rather than dialogue (e.g., caravansary, pasquinade, holocaust in the metaphorical sense). In a novel, such rich vocabulary contributes to the literary quality and can be elucidated by context or simply appreciated for its color. In a film, however, heavy or obscure words in voice-over could distract or confuse, especially if they are not crucial to the plot. Instead, the film can rely on visuals to convey meaning that the novel delivered through descriptive language. For example, as anticipated, the film omits the term

"caravansary." In Fitzgerald's text, Nick's use of "caravansary" likens Gatsby's home to an inn teeming with transient guests. In Luhrmann's film, rather than using this word in narration, the bustling party scenes themselves show the endless stream of guests and the grandiosity of Gatsby's mansion. The visual medium thus replaces the need for that specific archaic metaphor. The atmosphere of Gatsby's parties – large, lavish, overflowing with visitors – is communicated through rapid montages and set design, accompanied by music, without a narrator explicitly calling it a "caravansary." The omission likely stems from the filmmakers' judgement that the archaic term would not resonate with most viewers and that its essence could be conveyed non-verbally.

Another omitted archaism is "whomsoever." In the novel, this term appears in a formal register, but such a word in dialogue or voice-over today might sound excessively stiff or pedantic. The film accordingly uses more standard modern English; for instance, where the novel has Nick narrating someone "sauntered about, chatting with whomsoever he knew," the film might simplify this to "chatting with anyone he knew" or simply show the action without that line. This aligns with the general observation that cinematic discourse prefers colloquial, straightforward expression where possible.

Despite this overall reduction, two archaic terms are preserved in the film, which are worth discussing: "old sport" and "vinous."

"**Old sport**" is famously retained in the film because it is a character-defining catchphrase of Jay Gatsby. Gatsby uses "old sport" repeatedly when addressing Nick and other male characters, just as he does in the novel. The phrase is anachronistic, even in the 1920s, but that is precisely the point: it marks Gatsby as slightly affected, hinting at his self-crafted persona modeled on English gentlemen or Old World aristocracy. The filmmakers likely judged "old sport" to be indispensable for authenticity to the source material and Gatsby's characterization. Indeed, this archaic term is easily understood in context (meaning "friend/buddy") and serves as a memorable motif associated with Gatsby. In the film, actor Leonardo DiCaprio delivers the line "old sport" many times in a genial, intimate tone, reinforcing Gatsby's charm and background mystery. Because the audience can glean its meaning from context and perhaps recognize it as a signature phrase, its inclusion doesn't pose a comprehension hurdle. Instead, it becomes a thematic and character hook. Therefore, unlike other archaisms, "old sport" survives the adaptation intact and is arguably one of the linguistic highlights of the film, just as in the novel.

"**Vinous**" is a less prominent word, meaning "related to wine" or "wine-colored." In the novel, Nick uses it in a descriptive sense (e.g., "the moon had risen higher, and floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, vinous odor of the roses," an atmospheric description from Chapter 6). The term "vinous" is somewhat archaic or at least very uncommon in everyday speech. Interestingly, the film's voice-over narration (delivered by Tobey Maguire as Nick) includes some lines drawn directly from Fitzgerald's prose to preserve the poetic quality of the novel. It appears the word "vinous" made it into the voice-over in one of those descriptive passages, likely in a scene setting the mood with Nick's narration (possibly when describing the night of Gatsby's party or the general aura of decadence). If so, its retention might be due to the word's descriptive richness and the fact that it is part of a longer narrative sentence that the filmmakers wanted to quote for its literary beauty. The risk of misunderstanding "vinous" is mitigated by the fact that it's used in a metaphorical, sensory context (paired with "odor of roses" – suggesting a heady, wine-like scent). Even if viewers don't know the exact definition, the overall image and Nick's tone convey the intended meaning. This indicates that certain archaic or rare words can be kept if they contribute strongly to the film's artistic tone and if context clues (including visuals) help convey their essence.

Slang. The adaptation's handling of slang is slightly different from archaisms in that some slang might still resonate with modern viewers, whereas archaisms largely do not. Yet, the film still moderates the use of period slang, often opting for neutrality. Out of the four slang terms noted in the novel (bucks, rough-neck, fellas, swell), only "rough-neck" is plainly present in the movie's dialogue (specifically, in Nick's voice-over narration describing Gatsby). The decision to keep "rough-neck" likely stems from its importance in character dynamics: Nick's labeling of Gatsby as a "rough-neck" (even as a fleeting thought) reveals Nick's own prejudice or uncertainty about Gatsby's social status. The term is somewhat informal but not incomprehensible to a modern audience—"roughneck" is still in use today to denote a rugged or uncultured person (albeit more rarely heard in everyday speech). By including it, the film preserves a nuance of Nick's internal commentary on Gatsby. Additionally, because the word is self-explanatory enough (rough + neck implying a rough character) and delivered in narration, it does not disrupt the flow.

In contrast, the slang "bucks" used in a racial context is removed from the film's dialogue. Luhrmann's film does depict the scene of the black musicians or partygoers in a chauffeured car (a memorable visual moment scored

with contemporary music to draw parallels between 1920s jazz culture and modern hip-hop), but none of the characters verbally label them "two bucks and a girl" as Nick does in the novel. Omitting this slang avoids uttering a derogatory racial term on screen. This reflects a modern sensitivity: while a novel can present such a term as part of historical realism (with readers understanding it in context), a film might choose not to give voice to a racial slur unless it serves a very deliberate purpose, since hearing it aloud can be more impactful and potentially offensive. In this case, the visual communicates the social commentary (the inversion of roles with black passengers and a white driver) without needing Nick to use a term that contemporary audiences (rightly) find distasteful. It exemplifies a euphemizing or mitigating strategy in adaptation: the offensive slang is dropped to maintain audience sympathy for Nick and to avoid distracting from the moment's symbolism with a shock of insult. The effect of the scene is preserved (perhaps even amplified by the striking visuals and music) without the use of the outdated slur.

Similarly, casual slang like "fellas" and "swell" do not feature in the movie's dialogue, at least not prominently. In a 1920s setting, characters using those words would have been normal, but to a 2013 audience, excessive use of dated slang could sound forced or comical unless carefully handled. The filmmakers might have worried that using many period colloquialisms would either require explanation or risk seeming unintentionally humorous. For example, a line like "We had a swell time, fellas!" could come off as parodying the 1920s rather than authentically representing it. Therefore, the dialogue is written in a more timeless vernacular. The characters in the film mostly speak in a way that modern viewers can relate to, with only slight period flavor provided by accent, a few idioms, and the context of the scenes. Luhrmann's adaptation is known for mixing old and new elements (such as modern music with historical visuals), and the language approach fits this style: it does not slavishly mimic 1920s slang but uses just enough to remind us of the era without alienating the audience.

A very interesting case is the derogatory slang "kike," an ethnic slur for a Jewish person. In Fitzgerald's novel, this slur appears once: a character at Gatsby's party (Lucille) says she almost married a "little kike" who had been pursuing her. It is used to illustrate casual anti-Semitism of the time (Meyer Wolfsheim, a Jewish character, is also described in stereotypical language by Nick and others). In the 2013 film, this slur actually appears multiple times, which might seem counterintuitive given the film's general avoidance of offensive slang like "bucks." Reports and analyses of the film noted that the screenplay increased the usage of the word "kike," notably having Tom Buchanan or Jay Gatsby utter it in reference to Wolfsheim (the film's exact dialogue deviates in places from the novel). Why would the film use this offensive term more rather than less? One possible reason is characterization and emphasis of social attitudes. Tom Buchanan in both book and film is characterized as racist and anti-Semitic (in the novel he expounds a white supremacist book he read, and he derogatorily calls Gatsby "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" and implicitly slurs Wolfsheim). The film may have given Tom or even Gatsby a line using "kike" to strongly convey the bigotry present in that society, making it unambiguous to the audience. In Gatsby's case, if he uses the term (perhaps in a moment of anger or referring to Wolfsheim's associates), it would signal that despite Gatsby's glamour, he is a man of his era, susceptible to its prejudices.

It's worth noting that The Great Gatsby (2013) takes other liberties in language as well, such as adding modern phraseology occasionally or, in one controversial move, including modern music lyrics in party scenes. These choices show that the adaptation was not striving for linguistic purity of the 1920s, but rather an impressionistic blend that evokes the energy of the era for today's viewers. The selective use of slang fits into this approach.

CONCLUSION

Adapting the linguistic style of a novel to film is a complex task that requires balancing authenticity, clarity, and audience engagement. This study's analysis of archaism and slang usage in The Great Gatsby—comparing Fitzgerald's 1925 literary discourse to Luhrmann's 2013 cinematic discourse—demonstrates a clear pattern of linguistic adaptation. The novel's use of archaisms and period slang enriched its portrayal of the Jazz Age and added layers of meaning and tone; however, the film largely streamlines these elements, retaining only those that serve a purposeful role in characterization or thematic emphasis.

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