

The Role of Language in Shaping Identity and Social Class: A Study of Pygmalion

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Abstract

Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw as a significant text in the field of English Language Studies. The study focuses on how language functions as a powerful tool in shaping identity, social class, and personal transformation. Through the character of Eliza Doolittle, the play highlights the importance of pronunciation, accent, and linguistic competence in determining social mobility in society. The paper also examines the role of Professor Henry Higgins, whose phonetic training demonstrates the scientific and systematic nature of language learning. It connects the themes of the play with modern concepts in linguistics, such as sociolinguistics, phonetics, and language standardization. The transformation of Eliza from a flower girl to a refined speaker reflect show language education can influence both self-perception and societal acceptance. Furthermore, this study discusses the relevance of Pygmalion in contemporary English language teaching, especially in understanding accent bias, language attitudes, and communicative competence. The paper argues that the play remains a valuable resource for analyzing how language impacts power structures and identity formation. Pygmalion shows that language is not just a means of communication but a powerful tool for women's empowerment. Eliza's journey proves that mastering language helps women gain identity, challenge male dominance, and achieve equality in society. The paper discusses "Pygmalion" is not just a drama but a powerful study of language in society. It helps us understand that learning a language is not only about grammar, but also about identity, power, and social acceptance. Overall, this presentation aims to show that Pygmalion is not only a literary work but also an important text for understanding key concepts in English Language Studies.

Keywords: *Language and Identity, Phonetics and Pronunciation, Sociolinguistics, Social Class and Mobility, Women's Empowerment*

Introduction

Language has always served as more than a mere vehicle of communication; it is a social institution that encodes power, identity, and cultural belonging. George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion (1913) offers a timeless dramatic exploration of this fundamental truth. Through the story of Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl transformed into a polished lady under the phonetic tutelage of Professor Henry Higgins, Shaw presents language as the primary determinant of social class and personal identity in British society. The play's central argument—that speech patterns, accent, and linguistic competence can radically alter an individual's social standing—resonates with contemporary sociolinguistic theory and remains profoundly relevant to modern English Language Studies.

In the contemporary era, language continues to be a marker of social distinction. Accent bias, linguistic discrimination, and the privileging of standard dialects over vernacular speech are well-documented phenomena in educational, professional, and social settings worldwide. Shaw's text, written over a century ago, anticipates these modern sociolinguistic realities with remarkable precision and therefore serves not only as a canonical work of English literature but also as an invaluable pedagogical resource for students and scholars of linguistics, education, and cultural studies.

Review of Related Literature

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "linguistic capital" (1991) is particularly relevant here. Bourdieu argued that language is a form of capital exchangeable within social fields for economic, cultural, and symbolic rewards. Where a prestige dialect dominates, its speakers accumulate linguistic capital while speakers of stigmatized varieties are systematically disadvantaged — mapping directly onto *Pygmalion*, where Eliza's Cockney accent marks her as inferior and her acquisition of Received Pronunciation (RP) grants her access to elite social spaces. William Labov's pioneering work demonstrated that language variation is socially structured (1972). Speakers adjust their speech in response to social context and perceived prestige, a phenomenon Labov termed "style shifting." Eliza's transformation can be read as an extreme, pedagogically induced form of style shifting — moving permanently from a stigmatized variety to a prestige one.

Rosina Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* (2012) argues that accent bias functions as a socially acceptable form of discrimination, allowing prejudice to be expressed under the guise of evaluating "professionalism." Shaw dramatizes this exact mechanism: Eliza is not evaluated on her intelligence or moral character, but solely on the quality of her vowels and consonants.

Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) examined how women's language use is constrained by social norms and power structures. Eliza's situation exemplifies this constraint — taught to speak in a manner that pleases men, yet her linguistic empowerment ultimately enables her to assert autonomy. Feminist scholarship has emphasized this paradox: the tool used to subjugate Eliza ultimately becomes her instrument of liberation (Doan, 1994; Gainor, 1991).

Objectives

This paper investigates the multidimensional relationship between language, identity, and social class as depicted in *Pygmalion*. It explores how phonetic training and linguistic transformation function as mechanisms of social mobility, examines the ideological dimensions of standard versus non-standard language, and analyzes the gender dynamics embedded in the language education process. By connecting Shaw's literary vision to established frameworks in sociolinguistics, this study demonstrates that *Pygmalion* remains an essential text for understanding the intersection of language, power, and identity.

The objectives of this paper are fourfold: (1) to analyze how language acts as a determinant of social identity and class in *Pygmalion*; (2) to examine the role of phonetics and pronunciation in social transformation; (3) to connect Shaw's dramatic themes to modern sociolinguistic concepts; and (4) to evaluate the play's significance as a resource for understanding women's empowerment through linguistic agency.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, drawing on Shaw's *Pygmalion*, its preface, and his notes on phonetics. The analysis is situated within critical sociolinguistics, integrating Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital, Labov's model of language variation and prestige, and feminist linguistic theory. The methodological approach involves close reading of key scenes and dialogues to identify instances where language mediates social interaction, identity performance, and power negotiation. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, critical essays, and linguistic studies relevant to accent, identity, social class, and language pedagogy.

Analysis

Language as Social Identity: The Cockney Accent and Its Consequences

From the opening scenes of *Pygmalion*, Shaw establishes the Cockney accent as a social stigma. When Higgins overhears Eliza speaking in Covent Garden, his immediate response is one of disgust and linguistic judgment: he identifies her dialect with precision and declares it a mark of degradation. This scene encapsulates Bourdieu's argument that linguistic capital is unequally distributed — Eliza possesses rich emotional and moral qualities, but her Cockney speech renders her invisible and valueless within the dominant social order.

Shaw uses the contrast between Eliza's dialect and the RP-accented speech of the middle and upper classes to dramatize what sociolinguists call "language ideology" — the set of beliefs and attitudes that associate certain language varieties with intelligence, education, and moral worth, and others with ignorance, vulgarity, and inferiority. Higgins's characterization of Eliza's speech as "depressing," and his boast that he could pass her off as a duchess, reveals the arbitrary nature of these ideological associations: the same person, with the same ideas and values, will be judged entirely differently based solely on her accent.

Phonetics, Pronunciation, and Social Mobility

Professor Higgins represents the scientific dimension of language, embodying the belief that speech is learnable, trainable, and ultimately separable from birth and natural identity. His phonetic laboratory, his records and charts, and his meticulous drilling of Eliza all reflect the empirical tradition of phonetics as developed by scholars like Alexander Melville Bell and Henry Sweet (on whom Higgins is partly modeled). Shaw's choice to centre the play's transformation on phonetics rather than vocabulary, grammar, or etiquette is deeply significant: it suggests that the most fundamental marker of social identity is not what one says, but how one sounds.

Eliza's training represents an extreme form of what modern sociolinguists call "language socialization" — the process by which individuals acquire not merely linguistic forms but the social meanings attached to those forms. As Eliza masters RP, she does not simply change her pronunciation; she internalizes a new social identity, learns to move differently, think differently, and perceive herself differently. This illustrates the profound psychosocial dimensions of language learning that go far beyond mere mechanical skill acquisition.

Language Standardization and Linguistic Ideology

The concept of "standard language ideology," as theorized by Lippi-Green (2012), holds that one variety of a language is inherently superior, more correct, and more beautiful than others. This ideology is fundamentally mythological — all language varieties are equally systematic and rule-governed from a linguistic standpoint — but it has immense social power. *Pygmalion* both critiques and illustrates this ideology. Shaw, himself deeply interested in phonetic reform and the democratization of English pronunciation, uses the play to expose the arbitrariness of linguistic prestige while simultaneously showing how real and consequential its effects are.

The famous garden party scene, where Eliza is initially accepted as a lady, and subsequently unmasked, illustrates the performative nature of linguistic identity. Identity, as Judith Butler (1990) would later theorize, is not a fixed essence but a performance, constituted through repeated acts. Eliza's new identity is a linguistic performance — fragile, contingent, and dependent on the ongoing maintenance of the right sounds and registers.

Gender, Language, and Power

The gender dynamics of *Pygmalion* are as significant as its class dynamics. Eliza's transformation is orchestrated entirely by men — Higgins conducts the experiment, Pickering provides funding and gentlemanly encouragement, and Freddy Eynsford-Hill ultimately adores the product — and Eliza herself is treated throughout much of the play as an object of linguistic experimentation rather than a subject with her own desires and agency.

However, the play's resolution complicates this picture. In Act Five, Eliza confronts Higgins with remarkable assertiveness, refusing to return to her position of dependence and demanding recognition as an equal. This confrontation is only possible because of her linguistic transformation: the very competence she has acquired gives her the tools to articulate her self-worth and challenge Higgins's authority. Language, in this sense, becomes the instrument of her emancipation. Eliza's journey demonstrates that linguistic capital, once acquired, cannot be entirely controlled by those who bestow it. The learner ultimately exceeds and escapes the intentions of the teacher.

Relevance to Contemporary English Language Teaching

Pygmalion raises urgent questions about the purpose of language education: Is it to help learners acquire a prestige variety, thereby improving social mobility? Or does such teaching implicitly endorse the devaluation of learners' native linguistic identities? These questions are central to current debates in ELT about World English's, accent neutralization training, and communicative competence (Jenkins, 2000; Canagarajah, 2013).

Higgins represents a "deficit model" of language education, in which the learner's existing language is treated as something to be eradicated. Modern pedagogical theory rejects this in favor of approaches that value multilingualism, code-switching, and the learner's full linguistic repertoire. Read critically, *Pygmalion* helps contemporary students understand what is at stake — in terms of identity, dignity, and social justice — in decisions about language education policy.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of *Pygmalion* through a sociolinguistic lens yields several significant findings. First, the play provides a remarkably accurate literary representation of the mechanisms by which language mediates social stratification, anticipating theoretical frameworks developed by Bourdieu, Labov, and Lippi-Green by decades. Second, the character of Eliza Doolittle illustrates the profound psychological dimensions of language learning, demonstrating that acquiring a new linguistic variety involves not merely skill development but identity reconstruction. Third, Professor Higgins's phonetic methodology reflects the scientific basis of language study while simultaneously exposing the ideological nature of standard language ideology. Fourth, the gender dynamics of the play reveal the double-edged nature of linguistic empowerment: language can be used as a tool of social control, but it can also become a means of resistance and self-assertion. Fifth, the play's themes connect directly to contemporary debates in ELT and sociolinguistics regarding accent bias, language attitudes, communicative competence, and the politics of standard language teaching.

Conclusion

Pygmalion is far more than a romantic comedy or a Cinderella story. It is a deeply considered examination of the relationship between language, identity, power, and society — a relationship that remains as complex in the twenty-first century as it was in Edwardian England. For students and scholars of English Language Studies, it offers an unparalleled literary case study in sociolinguistics, dramatizing concepts that remain at the forefront of the discipline. In a world where accent bias and linguistic discrimination continue to affect employment, education, and social inclusion, Shaw's text offers a timely reminder that language is never merely a technical matter — it is always a matter of identity, dignity, and power.

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