

# The Impact of Social Class on Speech and Speech Inventiveness in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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## Abstract

The paper analyses the impact of social class on speech and further magical transformation of speech, which refers here speech inventiveness. *Pygmalion*, which was written by Bernard Shaw and is considered to be one of the most well-known works of contemporary British theater, exploits verbal violence in the guise of common language in order to impose authority over persons who are illiterate. Professor Higgins constantly mistreats the lower class flower girl Liza (Eliza) in the play, but as a result of the phonetic teachings she receives from her, Liza finally goes through a significant social transformation. Liza gains social standing as a consequence of her phonetic education and subsequent language skill improvement, but she also feels alienated because she has left her class as a result of the knowledge she has learned and is not fully welcomed by a different class. To put it another way, Liza's education in phonetics helped her to conform to society and do so, but it did not materially improve her social status.

**Keywords:** contemporary English drama, discourse of authority, G B Shaw, power, standardization, verbal violence

## 1. Introduction

Today, violence is manifested not only through physical force but also verbally. As Jacques Derrida points out, "In our network, everyday language is not neutral or innocent" (1981: p. 19). On the contrary, language embraces the sovereign power system of values and determines people's world view (Kumar, 2020; Bacha et. al., 2021). Albert Einstein put it, "most of our knowledge and beliefs are transmitted to us through language created by others" (1986: p. 13). The system determined by the sovereign power establishes authority through linguistic discourse, determines the 'normal' and provides a kind of 'standardization'. These standards determine people's lives, behaviors and roles in society. The relationship between language (dialect to dialect), status in life, and identity are explored in *Pygmalion*, along with the phenomenon of Professor Higgins utilizing education as a social 'standardization' tool. Verbal violence (manipulation, humiliation and abuse) and discrimination of language reveal the power of molding and destroying people (Kumar, 2021).

The play, *Pygmalion* was first staged in Germany in 1913 and in England in 1914. The title of the play alludes to the Greek mythological sculptor Pygmalion, who fell in love with the marble woman sculpture he produced and became known as Pygmalion. The statue was brought to life by Aphrodite as a result of Pygmalion's prayers to the gods. Similar to this tale, the phonologist Professor Higgins educates a typical flower girl in the play (Liza), who speaks with the 'Cockney' dialect (the English used by lower-class people in the east side of London) how to speak and act in accordance with standard social norms and thus creating a new Liza. Higgins, who serves as a symbol of education and authority throughout the work, has the intention of educating Liza in the domains of etiquette and phonetics in order for her to be accepted in Victorian London. *Pygmalion* is a modern echo of the rhetorical tradition

of the past because of the importance it places on fluency, style traits, and diction when it comes to the use of language.

## 2. Literature Reviews

Aristotle states in his book *Rhetoric*, “a peasant and an educated urbanite express themselves neither in the same words nor in the same way” (1995: p. 225). This difference became more pronounced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most obvious and observable indicators of social class in England have always been someone's speech and accent. During this period, people “showed their greatest prejudices against class consciousness, differences in pronunciation and accent created a great distinction between people [...]” (Brown, 1985: p. XX). *Pygmalion* examines the cultural preconceptions of inferiority and superiority in the educational system, identifying inequalities in speech as “class features.” This is pertinent to the milieu in which the play is set (Morgan, 1982: p. 9). In addition, this suggests that educational institutions are responsible for instilling such social norms and values in their students (Jabeen et al., 2022).

Both the UK and the US have common dialects that people of diverse socioeconomic classes select. Standard English is a term that is commonly used to refer to proper English. It is sometimes known as “King's English,” “Queen's English,” or “BBC English.” The BBC National News is often associated with the most prestigious accent, despite the fact that there is no standard pronunciation (Thomas & Wareing, 2002: p. 119). “Cockney English”, “Geordie English” (spoken in Newcastle, Tyne region), and “Glasgow English” are the most common “non-standard” regional English dialects (Honey, 1989: p. 2).

People's speech is not only associated with a particular region or social group on the social scale, but they are also expected to exhibit ‘behaviors’ that match the language they use (Thomas & Wareing, 2002; Mahmood, et. al., 2020). For example, professional groups such as administrators, politicians, and academics associated with the higher education and good moral level of the society are expected to use a prestigious dialect. It is associated with low moral level with the use of vulgar dialect and accent and is determined as a feature belonging to the lower class. For this reason, people who want to be accepted and not excluded in an elite environment should adopt more prestigious speech styles (Ajmal & Kumar, 2020; Çakmak, et al., 2021 ).

The importance George Bernard Shaw attaches to the science of phonetics is evident from the fact that he made the character Higgins a phonologist. Phonologists thought that by changing their local dialects, which was an obstacle to honesty in social classification, people could move to the upper classes. This alone could only be possible by working with a phonologist. It is abundantly clear that Shaw approved of the new scientific method proposed by the phonologists ; because in this way the proper ‘nonsense phenomenon’ is removed from being an upper class ‘snobbery’ (Crompton, 1970; Benyo & Kumar; 2020; Aslam, et. al., 2022).

## 3. Research Methods

This article has a conceptual and theoretical edge. The first chapter, “Introduction,” describes the setting and purpose of the study and is divided into five main components. The second chapter, which also examines the theoretical underpinnings of the terminology used, discusses the influence of social class on speech and speech originality in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. In the third chapter, the research methods used for this study are covered. The speech and speech creativity issues in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* are thoroughly explained and discussed in the fourth chapter. In the final chapter, the material from the prior chapters is condensed.

## 4. Discussions

The play's first act features characters from various social classes in London, as well as linguistic differences and personal prejudices. St. Paul's Church consists of a middle-class family (Mrs Eynsford-Hill, her son Freddy and daughter Clara), the wealthy gentleman (Uncle Pickering) and the phonetic (note taker - Professor Higgins), whose financial situation is mediocre. Flower girl Liza is trying to sell flower to these people who have just left the opera show and are waiting for a taxi.

Clara and Miss Eynsford-Hill approach Freddy and request that he call for a taxi. As Freddy walks, the flower girl hits the girl and drops her basket. The first words the girl said in the Cockney accent are: “Look ahead, Freddy. You hit me badly, dear” (Shaw, 1957: p.140). This style of speech positions Liza in the lower social class, and this idea also supports the girl's poor image in society. The flower girl addresses Freddy by name, and Ms. Eynsford-Hill assumes she is a prostitute when she hears this. To make the flower girl speak and confirm her suspicion, she buys a bouquet of violets from her. However, the girl tells him that she does not know her son (Shaw, 1957). Because of her use of colloquial language and her untidy demeanor, both of which are signs of the social class to which she belongs, it is considered that Liza is morally vacuous.

Later, when trying to sell her flowers to a different guy she refers to as 'Uncle Bey' (Master-Pickering), the flower girl finds that he only offers her a pittance in exchange for them. Now a man in the crowd says that Liza's words had been recorded by someone behind the column. Suspecting this person to be a police officer, the man tells Liza that he should give her flowers in exchange for the coins given by Uncle Bey. Fearing to face an immoral accusation like prostitution, the girl claims that she has not said anything important to the gentleman:

(popping up in horror) What if I talked to Uncle Bey? Is there a fault in this? Should I not sell flowers but be a pavement flower? I am the name girl today. May Allah not be surprised. I said what I said to Mr. Uncle, buy a flower from me. (Shaw, 1957: p.142)

Then he asks for help from 'Uncle Bey': "Oh, Uncle Bey, I love your eyes, that tongue hunter should not be a complainer from me. Otherwise, they make me crawl out on the grounds that I have spoken to a man from the master. My golden name becomes a stamp, and my daughter becomes a widow". (Shaw, 1957: p.143)

Ultimately, the note-taker introduces himself as a phonologist who transcribes the flower girl's cockney dialect on paper in phonetic letters. Lisson Grove takes Liza, an uneducated girl of low class society, so he surprisingly asked her how did she come here all the way? The flower girl broke down in tears and said, "You don't stop tying a dog" (Shaw, 1957: p.144) and emphasizes that she is not one of the 'girls' they know. Aware that she is seen as morally weak, the girl repeats over and over again the words "I am not one of the girls you know" throughout the first act. Someone in the lower class who hears what is being spoken claims that the upper class is not replacing the lower classes (Shaw, 1957: p.145). While the flower girl says "I will not defame my reputation", the note-keeper continues to guess where the people there come from according to their accents (Shaw, 1957: p.147).

From this point on, phonology and language dominate the game (Kumar et. al. 2022). The flower girl is chastised by the note-taker for her weak English skills. While the flower girl cries for the abuse inflicted on her, the note taker continues to humiliate her. The note-taker argues with the flower girl, who feels that she has an equal right to be there as everyone else:

A woman who makes such awful voices and talks so badly has no right to stand anywhere. He has no right to even live. Remember, you are a spirit owner, a person to whom the holy word is granted. Your mother tongue is the language of Shakespeare, Milton, the Bible. Don't keep making such wicked noises like a crow. (Shaw, 1957: p.147)

The person taking the notes, Higgins, exhibits her distaste for the abuse of the English language by referring to language as having a higher worth.

Liza's inadequacy in using the language prevents her from getting on top in the discussion she has with the note taker. The note taker finally makes an interesting claim:

You know, this rough-talking, uncarved girl, that street girl who will crawl on the sidewalks all her life. I can take that to an embassy ball called the duchess in three months. I could increasingly get a job that requires better English, such as a housemaid for a lady or salesman in a fine shop. (Shaw, 1957: p.147-148)

Instead of allowing the woman to flaunt her duchess position, the note-taker sees good English usage as a virtue that will help a woman from a lower class get employment. At this point, the note-taker and the 'master' or 'Uncle Bey', who heard what he said, introduce themselves to each other. Henry Higgins, a phonologist and the creator of the Universal Alphabet, is responsible for taking notes, while Colonel Pickering, an expert in Sanskrit and other Indian dialects, is responsible for teaching. Before leaving with Pickering for "27 A Wimpole Street," Higgins throws a few coins into the young girl's basket. This money is used by the flower girl to enter Freddy's cab. In a swaggering fashion, he asks the taxi driver to take him to 'Buckingham Palace'. However, after the car leaves, he returns the address to his poor neighborhood.

The primary focus of Act I is on the ways in which language is connected to the larger ideas of socioeconomic class, social roles, and identity. On the one hand, it depicts how people of higher social status who use "standard" English can insult those who speak "non-standard" English regardless of their living conditions or the educational restrictions they face. On the other hand, it demonstrates how this can happen. On the other hand, it symbolizes the fear felt by those in positions of authority that a defenseless flower girl would be charged with prostitution or encounter legal issues. Moreover, the flower girl suffers from her inability to have the verbal power to fight against the insults directed at her by the social upper class.

Despite her inability to speak in a formal or conventional manner, the flower girl has an instinctive understanding of the relationship between words and power. He understood that he needed to learn how to talk "correctly" in order to

improve his quality of life (in Standard English). To this end, he goes to Higgins' house the next day (Act II) to take the phonetic lesson. Higgins continues his aggressive attitude towards Liza, as he did the previous evening. When Higgins saw him, he immediately said, "Let's send it out. I don't want you" (Shaw, 1957: p.152). When he found out the reason for his visit, he said to Pickering, "Shall we go out? Or should we throw it out of the window as we hold it by its ear?" asks (Shaw, 1957: p.153). Liza hesitates communicating to the two linguists that she understands the role of language in obtaining success in life. She claims that she had the intention of enrolling in a phonetics school with the goal of obtaining a decent job at a flower shop. The two phonographers were stunned and impressed by the girl's offer to take lessons. Pickering bears the full cost of the experiment, recalling Higgins' claim in the first act. He asserts, however, that in six months Higgins won't be able to transform the flower girl into a considerable duchess. Higgins accepts the remarks in order to demonstrate his proficiency with phonetics. He says, "I will make this under-bridge moss that creeps in the mud into a duchess" (Shaw, 1957: p.155). The verbal violence used by Higgins in Liza's education is used both to degrade her and to elevate it to encourage the student to work to achieve her goal.

Following that, Liza will be taught personality grooming by Higgins. He tells Ms. Pearce to get rid of Liza's clothes, toss them into the trash can and also to put Liza into the bathroom, and beat her if it causes trouble. Pickering warns Higgins not to hurt her feelings with this type of humiliation and to be careful. However, Higgins says that the girl has no feelings to worry about. At this point, Liza, who is so hurt, gets up to go. Higgins tries to persuade him: "Think of chocolates, taxis, gold, diamonds" (Shaw, 1957: p.159). Chocolate and cab rides are fine with Liza, but when money and diamonds are added, she says no: "Steal the gold and the diamonds on her head! I am the name girl!" (Shaw, 1957: p.159). The same statements clearly have distinct meanings to two people from two different socioeconomic classes. Liza considered the "money" and "diamonds" Higgins used to deceive her into dreaming of a reunion to be symbols of immorality.

Realizing that his intentions have been misunderstood, Pickering proposes to explain to Liza. However, Higgins says it would be unnecessary to explain, claiming that the girl did not understand anything:

Higgins: [...] Explaining is useless. As a soldier, you need to know this. Just order the girl. Liza: You will stay here for six months and learn how to speak beautifully like a kind lady in the flower shop, and what you eat will be behind what you don't eat in front of it. With the money you have, you will get into taxis and buy chocolates. But if you get headless, you lie in a corner of the kitchen, among the cockroaches, I will not interfere. Mrs. Pearce will beat you well. At the end of six months, you will be dressed and donned and drive to Buckingham Palace in a royal car. If the king discovers that you are not a lady, the police will take you to the Tower of London. There, your head will be cut off as a lesson to all the insolent flower girls. If you do not know who you are, we will give you a gift of seven pounds and six shillings. That is enough to get you started in a flower shop. If you turn down this offer, you will be the most ungrateful, worst girl in the world. Even the angels in heaven become cries (Shaw, 1957: p.160).

The authoritarian nature of Higgins' persona is conveyed through his choice of words. Higgins says that telling Liza, who is incapable of sufficiently expressing herself, is a waste of time because she is incapable of adequately explaining herself. Liza is defenseless and in a precarious situation because she is unable to respond to Higgins' verbal assault for the most of the play. Not only will Higgins continue to treat Liza as if she is nothing if she is unable to articulate her desires, but he will also verbally assault her. Miss Pearce follows Liza into the restroom to continue her transformation into a well-mannered young lady. The societal abuse Liza experiences in the second act includes having her clothes burned and the hot bath she was given to mean the "difficulties to be overcome in order to clean her soul and body" (Berst, 1973: p. 205). Liza undergoes months of phonetics and etiquette training after this stage to alter her appearance, until the day she is unveiled to the public.

In the third act, Liza is put to the test for the first time in front of an audience in Ms. Higgins' guest room. Higgins' mother has been looking forward to seeing Mrs. Eynsford, Clara, and Freddy as their company this evening. Liza remembered seeing them in the midst of a downpour in Covent Garden in the past. However, Liza's current physical appearance, diction and dresses are far from reminiscent of the previous encounter. Higgins limits the talk frame to harmless and safe topics such as 'health issues' and 'weather'. As long as he mimics standard etiquette and language taught by Higgins, everything goes well. However, in the Cockney jargon that he has escaped, his aunt tells the kitty how he was taken care of and he fails the exam. When Freddy asks Liza whether she is walking from the park on the exit, Liza replies roughly: "Is she walking? Is there shit walking?" (Shaw, 1957: p.178). According to Higgins, the upper middle class has embraced this speech as "a new good luck." Additionally, while Clara appears ready to use Liza's "new sweetness," which is labeled as trendy, Freddy is awestruck by the beauty and range of emotions that Liza exhibits.

Regardless, Liza's blunders don't go unnoticed by Ms. Higgins. After the guests leave, Higgins talks about the experiment in which Miss Higgins and Pickering Liza were used as guinea pigs. Ms. Higgins expresses that Liza showed a superficial improvement, but gave herself "in every sentence she said" (Shaw, 1957: p.180). He claims that the two acoustic scientists are really just two little toddlers playing with their living toys. Higgins objects, stating the following in light of his interaction with Liza and the principles he upholds:

Is it to play? This is the hardest job I've ever taken. Do not be fooled about this, mommy. It's terribly interesting to recreate a person by giving him a whole new language. Thus, bridging the gap that separates one class from another, one servant from another (Shaw, 1957: p.181).

Higgins emphasizes the importance of education and language in reforming individuals and eradicating class distinctions. However, eliminating class differences is not as easy as it might seem. Higgins and Pickering state that since they cannot foresee the final effect of the transformation they are trying to create on Liza, they will spend their time teaching Liza like a doll, dressing her and "discovering new Lizas" (Shaw, 1957: p.181).

In addition, they state that when the experiment is complete, all the advantages will be left with him and he can go his way. On the other hand, Ms. Higgins states that Liza cannot work as a lady and in addition to this, she will be dragged into misery since she does not have a "lady income" (Shaw, 1957: p.183). Pickering and Higgins claim that they can find an easy job suitable for Liza after this conversation.

Higgins and Pickering escort Liza to the embassy ball after she has taught for six months. The training given to Liza yields results as Higgins and Pickering expected, and like the other guests, the Ambassador's wife is also very impressed by Liza. Liza has established herself as a duchess in London society.

The fourth act begins with Higgins, Pickering, and Liza depart the embassy party and set out for Higgins' residence. Pickering congratulates Higgins on his accomplishment as he thanks God for his efforts. Liza, on the other hand, has developed a guarded demeanor. It will be beneficial to consider the complete sequence of events leading up to that crucial turning point in the game. First, language was presented as etiquette associated with the manners of Victorian society or the environment. Therefore, not being able to use language properly is seen as a major obstacle to grade advancement. Liza is positioned outside the traditional English elitism, which largely presupposes the use of correct language skills. Higgins and Pickering's aim is to educate Liza in this elitist attitude.

The remainder of the play, however, reveals that as Liza's language comprehension increases, she gains both personal power and loneliness. This dichotomy is explored throughout the play. At the stage where she is alone with Higgins, Liza asks her trainer the vital question previously voiced by Ms. Pearce and Ms. Higgins: "What am I going to be? What will be my condition?" (Shaw, 1957: p.187). For Liza, the focus is no longer her success at the ball, but the last 'blockage' point that her education brought her. After Higgins had successfully taught her the desirable "standard" accent, she came to the conclusion that there was no way she could return to the life she had previously led.

As Liza's knowledge of the language and culture increased, her outlook on life changed in lockstep. Therefore, Higgins' phonetic training to Liza has already exceeded its original purpose and Liza has turned into a subject integrated into what is considered normal. Liza has accidentally "standardized" and "normalized" her previous way of life in terms of late Victorian social stereotypes by acquiring linguistic abilities. This has enabled her to surpass her primary objective of enhancing living conditions.

Higgins asks Liza to be his wife. Liza turned down the offer right away: "I would sell flowers there [Covert Garden], not myself. You have now made me a kind lady. I have nothing left to sell" (Shaw, 1957: p.189). This stage of the game shows that Liza, who reacted to Higgins' insensitive attitude, can now comfortably argue with her trainer, moreover, she rebelled against him. However, the fact that Higgins and he are people of different worlds and that they will always remain that way is gradually settling into Liza's consciousness.

Liza now treats Higgins as her boss and speaks officially, emphasizing the class difference between them: "I'm sorry. I'm a mean, ignorant piece of florist. I need to know my place. There cannot be an exchange of feelings between the rabble like us and gentlemen like you" (Shaw, 1957: p.190). This attitude of Liza causes Higgins to be angry and accuse him of ungratefulness: "God damn me for putting the knowledge I have acquired with a great difficulty on a heartless street slut like you, putting you in my house, my home" (Shaw, 1957: p.191). In their own way, they are both right. He does not endeavor to conclude Shaw's debate throughout the game in one way or another. The aim of the author is to create a platform of thought in the context of the discussion he exhibits, not to find a solution to the problem.

After Higgins hurries out of the room, Liza, who leaves the house collecting her belongings, runs into Freddy, who is waiting for her way. The final act of the play takes place in Mrs. Higgins' house. Higgins came to visit his mother

with Pickering. Miss Higgins tells her that Liza, who had spent the night as her guest, would come down if she promised her son to behave. After a while, Liza joins them like a Victorian lady. Higgins' reaction by saying that Liza was playing the role taught by her shows that the training given to Liza is 'standardizer' and 'normalizer':

Let him speak, mother. Is there a single thought in his head that he hasn't learned from me, a single word he hasn't picked up from me? This creature I found among the spinaches and crushed cabbage leaves in the Covert Garden is now up and looks like a lady (200).

According to Higgins' statement, it is impossible for Liza to have personal ideas, except that they impose it through language education. But Shaw clearly shows that Liza's education was not a brainwashing that would require blind adherence to the rules of middle-class society. Liza is far from being the typical product of these processes, as she preserves her "rebellious" features as at the beginning of the game.

The encounter in Miss Higgins' guest room ends the game with a verbal duel between Higgins and Liza. Stuck in her strange status, Liza tells Higgins that she stole her independence and enslaved her with the education she gave her: "I wish I could return to my flower basket. [...] The world would feel awkward. You took away my independence. Even though I dress in fancy, I am a slave now." (208). Liza tells her that she will marry Freddy would be the last straw for Higgins. The work he created (Liza) does not deem an ordinary and featureless young man like Freddy worthy. However, the situation is unsolvable and in time Liza will indeed marry Freddy and open a flower shop.

This ending is not happy enough for either Higgins or Liza. Liza is caught between two lifestyles, old and new. Under the supervision of Higgins, the advocate and representative of the phonetic standard throughout the story, Liza went through a process of 'normalization' and as a result she became a person who did not belong to any class and fell outside all identifiable classes.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the many issues discussed in-depth in this drama is education. Shaw emphasizes the role that education plays in defining a person's social level. Even The drama nevertheless underlines the "dependent" position that most women are in, where their lack of education can only restrict the kind of partner they can find for themselves. A woman's likelihood of marrying someone from a prominent social level is increased by her education and intelligence. The emphasis of this education is on conduct, communication, and manners. It's also important to keep in mind that Shaw was a socialist. He wrote on topics that, in his opinion, were significant to society as a result.

*Pygmalion* covers several linguistic facets of language use across various social classes in addition to showing social rank discrepancies and the absurdity of class. Shaw's play investigates a variety of linguistic traits. Higgins and Pickering examine the variances in speech among people of various ancestries while conducting phonetic and linguistic research. This drama ironically mocks the idea of class and social standing in the end. It emphasizes how flexible even things that appear to be unyielding can be. It is considerably simpler than it appears to move from one socioeconomic class to another. There are disadvantages to this mobility, however Shaw also emphasizes this in the play.

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