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Exploring Language, Class, and Identity in Shaw's Pygmalion: An Analysis through Communication Accommodation Theory

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Abstract

In this article, I will analyze the evolution of speech in Eliza Doolittle in George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion (1913), through the lens of Howard Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). The communication accommodation theory details how individuals adapt their style in the direction of convergence or divergence with people that they perceive (depending on social identity and relationships). The theory can be applied to intercultural communication, workplaces, and social settings. Analyze the social language through the socio linguistic right language is a means to social growth and personal development. It uses the concepts of convergence and divergence in the study of Eliza, a flower seller from the working class with Cockney speech transformed into an upper-class lady to use upper-class language. The study provides evidence of Eliza's growing social mobility through subtle shifts in her speech, as well as how her lowborn background continues to shape her life even as her social position improves. It also analyzes language through the lens of those who either accept or fight against prevailing social structures, particularly when it comes to the social-class differences signaled by differences in language. This paper highlights that class is still a barrier to full mobility and that whilst language is a forte asset this does not equate with being able to penetrate the workings of the elite in their true terms. An interplay of language reinforces the rigid structures of society, but, with a point-of-view this makes Pygmalion a critique of language itself and how it controls the ability to change.

Keywords: Pygmalion, Sociolinguistics, Style-Shifting, Social Stratification, Language Variation, Communication Accommodation Theory

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Introduction

This paper argues that Eliza Doolittle's style-shifting, examined through the combined lens of Howard Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and William Labov's sociolinguistic theory, reveals the limitations of linguistic assimilation as a tool for overcoming rigid class hierarchies.

First published in 1913 as the play Pygmalion, the book revolves around not only social class, but self-realization, and communication, and metamorphosis. The central character, Eliza Doolittle, is a Cockney flower seller who is living in poverty until she comes under the tutelage of the phonetics expert professor Henry Higgins, who facilitates a radical change in her. Higgins makes a bet with Colonel Pickering, another expert in phonetics, that he can teach Eliza to pronounce word with an upper-class accent, and pass her off as an upper-class lady. The story explores class differences, self-improvement and social mobility through her changing use of language. Pygmalion has a double entendre as it refers to both the Greek tale of a sculptor who falls in love with his creation representing the birth of a new identity (Shaw, 1913). But Eliza's transformation in Shaw's novel goes beyond language to include her struggle to reconcile the higher social position into which she is thrust with her poor roots. This shift critiques prevailing cultural expectations and illuminates the power of language to shape an individual's place in society.

This paper draws on Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and sociolinguistic analysis to identify how Eliza's linguistic change in Pygmalion functions. CAT's convergence and divergence principles illustrate how speech adaptations correlate with changing social dynamics. Eliza begins with convergence to upper-class speech as a means of becoming socially accepted but diverges later to maintain her autonomy and defy societal limitations (Giles, 1973). Examining the novel through such a framework, the study considers how language serves as a signifier of social mobility and also a site of identity tussle. The goal of this research is to capture the complex interactions of linguistic accommodation, class hierarchy, and identity transformation, illustrating that while language can drive social mobility, this does not completely remove class divisions or internal conflict (Giles & Niedzielski, 1998).

Additionally, William Labov's theory of style-shifting and its relation to social stratification is introduced to examine Eliza's transformation in a more nuanced manner. According to Labov, there is a systematic correspondence between

linguistic variation and social structures, and speakers often adjust their speech according to setting, audience and perceived prestige (Labov, 1966). Eliza's shift from Cockney to RP (Received Pronunciation, a class dialect spoken by the upper class of England) can be seen as either conscious or subconscious reflection of her environment and hopes. Through Labov's framework, Eliza's stylistic shifts are not simply theatrical devices but sociolinguistic phenomena that map more broadly onto social dynamics. The speech modification via the social myth points out the strong ties between language and class on one hand, and identity as a performance in a divided society on the other hand. When Eliza uses her speech to match the upper-class aesthetic, she briefly occupies elite spaces, but those spaces are marked by a conflict between herself and the self she creates.

Employing Labov's sociolinguistics theory in tandem with Communication Accommodation Theory, this research situates Pygmalion as a performative text that challenges linguistic intersections with broader socio-political constructs. Theoretical models — Allé's and Halliday's — complement one another to illuminate how Eliza's transformation of language reflects not only societal pressures but also personal aspirations. The study highlights the way that language functions as both a gatekeeper and a mirror that grants access to some soft social spheres while simultaneously reflecting the speaker's origins and inner conflict. Combining these frameworks, the analysis shows how the evolution of Eliza's speech patterns highlights themes of power, belonging, and self-determination. It ultimately looks to draw out Shaw's underbelly—that the surface-level adaptation of speaking a prestigious dialect cannot achieve everything and cannot wipe away the realities of rigid class structures—that identity can only be so glamorously diverted from being unwelcome in urban centers, a terrain neither modest nor privileged (Labov, 1972).

This study aims to explore how Giles' sociolinguistic theory explains Eliza Doolittle's linguistic shift and its connection to her social class in Pygmalion (1912). It also seeks to analyze how style shifting in the play reflects Eliza's internal struggle between her original identity and the expectations associated with her new social status. Through this lens, the research will examine the role of language in shaping identity and class perception.

Review of the Literature

Çelik's (2024) concept of Galatification, drawn from the Ovidian myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, offers a compelling framework for understanding Eliza's transformation as more than linguistic — it is a gendered performance shaped under patriarchal control. In Shaw's play, Professor Higgins assumes the role of sculptor, much like the original Pygmalion, attempting to mold Eliza into his ideal of a refined, upper-class woman. This process is not only about phonetics but about compliance, femininity, and class respectability, echoing Çelik's idea of women being "inscribed and erased" through male-dominated narratives. Eliza's refined speech is thus not merely a tool for social mobility but also a manifestation of the patriarchal expectations placed upon women to speak, behave, and appear in ways that affirm male authority. The "refined" speech becomes a performative mask — one that allows Eliza to be seen but not fully accepted, to speak but not be truly heard. In this way, her transformation is not only linguistic but symbolic of the constraints placed upon female identity in a classed and gendered society. This intersection of linguistic accommodation and gender performance highlights the dual pressures Eliza faces, linking Çelik's theory directly to the central argument of this study.

Tribhawan Kumar et al. (2022), Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Language of Oppression and Liberation in a Divided London: George Bernard Shaw The Cockney accent of Eliza Doolittle is a social marque, which identifies her as lower class and adds to her marginalization and deprivation of economic and social mobility (Holland, 1993). Phonetic training thanks to Professor Higgins becomes Eliza's more "refined" way of speaking — consecutively transforming her social position. However, the study claims, Eliza's newly polished way of speaking ultimately only serves to make her a hybrid, stranded in a class limbo where she cannot be fully accepted as a member of the upper class because she was not born among them, and therefore her articulation is merely that of a mask. These observations echo current debates on linguistic discrimination, and the way accent adjustment bathes incoming practices in our increasingly diverse societies.

Also, Nalliveettil (2020) analyses in the context of ESL/EFL classrooms the language and communication components of George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion. This approach reflects the English of the Victorian period with its dialectic structure, and its affirmation on both linguistic and literary complexity of the play as a measure of

the English spoken during that era, Time Trees adopts this form by having a chapter for each character, dialogic features. In contrast to previous studies, this analysis emphasizes neglected discursive aspects of the text and employs Weigand's dialogical principles to map characters' speeches. I think it offers a new linguistic interpretation of Pygmalion because it investigates how relationships across difference create meaning and communication. It sheds light the strength of these dialogues over the course of the show, as a method for ELS/EFL students to develop their communication — verbal, non-verbal and written. Finally, the text offers assistance for teachers in adapting the linguistic revelations in such a way as to promote language instruction, thus reconceptualizing Pygmalion as a pragmatic guide for improving communication skills in language learners.

Eliza Doolittle according to an analysis by Aneela Anbar and of scholars (2022) can viewed as a symbol of the class struggle. While structural barriers create and perpetuate the ecosystem, some individuals who are positioned to leverage education, mentorship, and adaptability subvert established hierarchies, the study argues. But it also advises us to be wary of the illusion of meritocracy, arguing that systemic inequalities are perfunctorily repeated, even after individuals make an effort to overcome them. That raises the stakes of the plot of Pygmalion: If Eliza rises from her project, transformed in both matter and manner of speech, that does give her new possibilities, but it also doesn't mean she finds social acceptance or, by extension, empowerment. Instead, it asks whether real social mobility is possible in fixed class structures, or if language is simply a stand-in for the status it bestows and an instrument of corporeal change. Another one in study on style-shifting (2023) by Yuhan Lin which is a broader phenomenon of sociolinguistics. Lin, in turn, proposes a general model of style-shifting, exploring how individuals modulate their speech, depending on context, audience, and aspirational social class.

Despite being written about Chinese Mandarin, this study is useful to Pygmalion in general as it gives insight into Eliza's conscious changes to her speech in relation to different contexts. Interpreting language use as performative, the study situates speech within social contexts, signifying not so much an index of identity as a means of achieving dominance and belonging. However, Lin contends that although Higgins sees Eliza's transformation as a success of education and refinement, Eliza herself sees the limitation of linguistic assimilation. The research shows that style-shifting is not always a bridge or a ladder to upward social mobility; rather, it can be a set of oppressive expectations about how people are supposed to speak in order to

gain legitimacy in social life, which reproduce social hierarchies. This nuance engages with recent re-objectifications of Pygmalion, which complicate the idea of Eliza's linguistic transformation as a plain success story into an uneasy negotiation of identity and autonomy.

But Mir (2023) offers a detailed analysis of Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw, with a focus on the critique of previously traditional gender roles presented in the theater play. Although the book's usual praise is for its analysis of social class and education, here the emphasis is on probing gender, examining how the phenomenon of socialization shapes individual identities and actions. The study looks only at Eliza Doolittle and how her relationships change and matures over the course of the play, and Shaw helps convey traditional femininity/enforced masculinity through her growth. The study provides a deeper understanding of the text, illuminating its relevance to current discourses around gender and identity through the lens of feminist theories. The implications of the cultural experience of Mir's work, as they relate to Pygmalion suggest the enduring relevance of the show with a feminist lens during a period in which Yahya Mir developed his trump card with the language of vehicle drawing as a result of this upon existing output to craft new iterations of the play, hewn across proffering alternatives to Pygmalion along with her other work, which functions to critique conventional perspectives, that became centers of new iterations.

A linguistic analysis of Pygmalion - how Shaw uses language to create characters, indicate social class and challenge social norms (Qilichboyeva Rayhona, 2024) Notably Eliza Doolittle, but also the other characters who shaped the speech and why the speech reflects that social status, offering a discusses of the top dog nature of language as a class tool and mobility.

On the other hand, withy Zhao (2024) designs exploration on linguistic patterns in George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion, which the main reference theories are Labov as phonological variant and Halliday's register as a framework. Zhao analyzes the characters' words from the perspective of language variation (regional, class and gender), all while keeping in mind the larger question of language change. The research dives into the influence of language on social identity, highlighting both minor and major shifts in society over time while underlining the enduring power of different languages. The study presents Pygmalion as an elaborate piece that unpacks the interplay between social identity and language, one that showcases the

potential of language to change people as well hold up a mirror to their identity markers.

Moreover, Çelik (2024) introduces Galatification explaining how yggdrasils are told and influenced by men to shape-up, educate and mold to answer expectations. Inspired by the Ovidian tale, in which a sculptor turns a statue named Galatea into his ideal woman, Galatification works as both a noun and a verb. It's the patriarchal practice of inscribing and erasing women through male domination and authorization, particularly by husbands or fathers.

This research works by contextualizing Petruchio's subjection of Katherine in the Shakespearean comedy The Taming of the Shrew with the shaping of Galatea by Pygmalion. Both narratives highlight women as creatures broken into submission under the male gaze, Katherine's transformation compared to that of a wild beast rendered into a pet. Çelik introduces Galatification as a scaffold for mapping, tracing historical and literary tendencies of male-propagated narratives that put women on display as instruments shaped for male, and particularly heterosexual male, tenderizing as close-up subjects.

The new term helps explain how these repeating patterns have long-term cultural ramifications and provides a novel approach for understanding gender depiction in literature.

This research fills the gap by utilizing William Labov's sociolinguistic theory, specifically looking at style-switching and social hierarchy, to examine the linguistic changes of Eliza Doolittle in Pygmalion. Though past studies have delved into gender, class, and power, there is a lack of attention towards analyzing Eliza's social mobility and identity expressed through language change within Labov's framework, specifically regarding her speech variation and class advancement.

Research Framework

This study applies William Labov's theory of style-shifting alongside Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to analyze Eliza Doolittle's linguistic transformation as both socially and psychologically driven. Labov's work on sociolinguistic variation reveals how individuals shift linguistic styles in response to social stratification—Eliza's switch from Cockney to Received Pronunciation (RP)

represents a classic case of upward style-shifting to gain access to elite circles. Labov explains that such variation is often systematic and subconscious, influenced by prestige norms and audience design, especially in formal settings.

CAT, on the other hand, foregrounds intentional social interaction, emphasizing how speakers converge toward or diverge from others' speech patterns to manage social distance. In Eliza's case, she initially converges toward RP as a strategy to reduce the perceived class gap between herself and high society. However, once she achieves this linguistic shift, she begins to diverge to reclaim her autonomy and identity demonstrating resistance to being molded entirely by Professor Higgins or society's expectations.

Together, these theories offer complementary insights: Labov explains how Eliza's language changes map onto structural class dynamics, while CAT reveals the interpersonal and identity-based motivations behind her accommodation choices. Eliza's speech becomes both a tool of social access and a site of struggle—her performance of refinement opens doors, but also alienates her from her roots. Through this dual lens, the study uncovers how language functions not just as a marker of social mobility, but as a performative act of identity negotiation shaped by both societal structures and personal agency

Using William Labov's Theory, this study looks into Pygmalion in a qualitative framework and primarily focuses on text analysis. An important figure of sociolinguistics, Labov provided crucial insights about how language reflects and perpetuates social orders. His groundbreaking work, in particular on language in urban settings, revealed systematic differences in language use that were tied to social status, gender, ethnicity and geographic region. And Labov's insights on linguistic variation and social stratification, and on style shifting, provide a strong analytical foundation for investigating how Pygmalion ties together the relationship between language and social mobility. The elasticized variety of your speech depends on the framing of your social interaction and often echoes your class background, as pointed out by Labov.

Methodology

This is a unique qualitative, sociolinguistic study, which examines the complex ties between language, identity, and class in George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion. The

research is based on William Labov's theory of sociolinguistic variation, which investigates how forms of language — pronunciation, grammar, and style — change according to class and setting (Labov, The Social Stratification 1966; Sociolinguistic Patterns 1972). Simultaneously, the study draws on Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory to theorize how speakers adapt their speech to decrease or reinforce social distance through convergence and divergence processes (Giles, Coupland 1991). This study seeks to demonstrate how Eliza Doolittle's language flux, especially his heterogeneous transformation of Cockney English into Received Pronunciation, acts as a tool of social mobility, but is also a source of internal struggle. To illuminate the interplay between language, identity, and class, this study focuses on select pivotal scenes from Pygmalion that mark key linguistic shifts and identity negotiations in Eliza Doolittle's transformation. These scenes were chosen based on their discursive richness and dramatic intensity, where Eliza's speech style visibly changes or is commented upon by others. For instance, the scene where Eliza first visits Professor Higgins showcases her natural Cockney dialect, signaling her working-class roots.

The Ambassador's party scene, by contrast, captures her full adoption of Received Pronunciation (RP), symbolizing her apparent success in linguistic refinement and class performance. However, the post-party confrontation scene highlights Eliza's identity conflict and emotional disillusionment, where she questions the very success of her transformation. These moments serve as sociolinguistic turning points, offering insight into how language operates not just as a marker of class, but as a site of internal tension, gendered expectations, and social performance. By analyzing these scenes through Labov's theory of style-shifting and Giles' CAT model, the study reveals how Eliza's language both reflects and resists the rigid hierarchies of Edwardian society analysis reveals the phonological, syntactic and lexical ways Eliza changes, as well as metalinguistic comments by other characters on her speech. This approach focuses on how language acts both performatively to reproduce, and performatively to subvert, such class structures. Coupled together within this nuanced framework of class-based speech patterns and speech genre accommodation, Labov and Giles provide an analytical lens through which to interrogate Shaw's critique of social mobility as well as the performative nature of class identity.

Theoretical Framework

Utilizing William Labov's (1972) theory of style-shifting and social stratification as a founding methodology, this paper contends that the means of linguistic variation is not solely based on human agency but, rather, a reflection of social hierarchy. Labov's framework posits that, in the presence of certain content, people automatically adjust their language use, depending on the context, recipient, and other social conventions, an indicator of their conscious level of awareness and aspirations for social class hierarchies. This theory is especially relevant in Pygmalion considering that Eliza Doolittle's transformation entails not just phonetics and grammar, but also how someone is positioned socially and accepted on the class spectrum. Labov's work on language as a social index will be crucial to uncovering how Eliza's phonological changes become an exposition of social mobility and the performance of identity and class consciousness.

Her story illustrates how performative language can be, where "sounding right" serves as currency for coming off well socially but comes at a personal price. This will not only explore the technical aspects of Eliza's style-shifting but will also be interpreted through a psychological and sociological lens that will enable the research to look at and assess what pressures inform Eliza's speech choices. By synthesizing Labov's sociolinguistic theory with a qualitative textual analysis of language, both in terms of individual character dialogue and in broader narrative structure, the study will show the dual role language plays as both a site of empowerment and a site of constraint. This framework will ultimately illuminate the symbolic weight of language as it both establishes and reinforces tiered social positions; it will explore why the illusion of transformation as produced through spoken words is not a fully liberating force that frees the self from the burden of origins in Shaw's scope. (Labov 1972)

Text Analysis

- **Speech as Social Symbolism: How Language Shapes Perceptions of Class in Pygmalion**

Pygmalion language as social marker class and identity George Bernard Shaw examines how speech can act as both a means for inclusion and an impediment to movement, acting as a solidifier of the class divide in early 20th-century England. Eliza Doolittle's phonetic makeover at the hands of Professor Henry Higgins is a

masterly testament to the link between language and social stratification, detailing how the way one speaks determines social station. This idea is well captured by Higgins when he exclaims, "I can place her accent. It's a mixture of the two. The English of the lower middle class, and the English of the common man. There's a difference between a lady and a flower girl in how they speak, and it's not just words. It's also the pronunciation, the inflection, the grammar." (Shaw, 1913, Act 1, Scene 1). Justice is not only an essential part of communication, it is also a marker of social stratification, whether formal or not.) Developed by Howard Giles, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which accounts for our tendency to change our speech in response to social connection (Giles, 1973) provides a framework for our understanding of Eliza's development.

This is similar to the initial convergence of Eliza in order to conform to upper-class expectations by practicing her pronunciation and grammatical usage to better fit in socially. But her transformation is also psychological as well as linguistic. Her mastery of upper-class speech leads her to stalemate with her identity, knowing all too well that there are social norms that go beyond the nuances of language. Her later differences, when she slips back into some of her original speech, show she's not going to be molded entirely by outside expectations. This article investigates the duality of language as a pathway to empowerment and a tool of class oppression through a CAT and sociolinguistic analysis of Pygmalion. Shaw thus condemns the shallowness in class disparities, whereby speech can allow the semblance of societal rise and thus class, yet true acceptance always seems just out of reach (Shaw, 1913).

❖ Labov's Principle in Pygmalion's Linguistic Landscape

According to William Labov's Principle of Linguistic Variation, speakers adapt their speech to the social environment in which they are operating, and it was found that many aspects of language serve a social function (Labov, 1966). Importantly, in Pygmalion linguistic adaptation is at the heart of the interactions between characters, so that their relationship — and their respective places in the rigid social hierarchy of early 20th-century England — is literally in the words they use. The titular Eliza Doolittle's metamorphosis, undertaken while being schooled by Professor Henry Higgins, showcases language as a tool for social mobility, but also a means by which the ruling class is able to reaffirm and ossify class systems. That's the point he drives home through Higgins, when he says: "You see, the moment I'm set to let you talk, why, you'll get back to your old Cockney habits. You'll be "ain'ting" and "garn" throughout. You are formally taught to speak until October 2023. You

have to make yourself a proper lady." (Shaw, 1913, Act 2, Scene 1). It suggests that an individual's speech is inextricably tied to their social position. Eliza's original Cockney dialect identifies her as working class, and her later use of refined pronunciation and formal grammatical structures indicates an effort at assimilation into the upper-class. This transformation conforms to Labov's articulations of style-shifting, which describes the ways in which speakers adjust their language based on contextual and social factors. But the change is not merely linguistic; it exposes the limits of language as a technology for genuine social integration.

Although Eliza adapts the elite's verbal traits as successfully, her fight for status, identity, and agency demonstrates that linguistic change does not render structured class antagonism benign. This analysis, then, interrogates Pygmalion through Labov's sociolinguistic framework, examining the manner in which linguistic variation acts as both mirror and perpetuator of the structures of society. This piece tackles a common belief that being able to speak as one of the upper classes means actual social acceptance, showing instead how inwardly-bound class identity is, and cannot be boiled down to speaking a certain way. Linguistic transformation is a central element of Eliza Doolittle's character arc in Pygmalion, embodying the interrelation of language, identity, and social mobility.

Her metamorphosis from a working-class hoyden to an aristocrat, with a strong Cockney accent to a polished speaker of Standard English, reflects the implacable pressures of a dominant culture but also the conflicts between the individual and society. The transformation he emphasizes as necessary when he says, "You see, the moment I let you talk, you'll go back to your old Cockney habits. You'll be 'ain'ting' and 'garn' the whole time. You should be taught how to speak. You have to make yourself into a proper lady." (Shaw, 1913, Act 2). The statement emphasizes the notion that we must speak correctly to be accepted socially. Higgins's insistence on linguistic refinement implies that language is not only a tool for communication but the marker of class distinction. Eliza, aware of the fact, slowly starts to adopt upper-class ways of speaking, such as in Act 3, when she replies more refined, "I am a common ignorant girl at at that, and I must be respectable in my station. "I'll do what you tell me to do, Professor Higgins." This moment becomes a pivotal point in Eliza's change—she recognizes her disadvantaged status but adopts accent change as a pursuit of social ascent. Her genteel speaking, however, does not ensure a place within proper society as it were, demonstrating the limits of volition insofar as it can

be assigned to linguistic performance in determining a status within the class hierarchy.

Though Eliza's speaking style may appear on the surface to be consistent, watching her throughout the film through the lens of Labov's Principle of Linguistic Variation reveals that she is in fact displaying evidence of style-shifting, a phenomenon where a person changes not only how they speak, but also the language they use depending on the social circumstances. As self-reliant as Shaw's journey emerges, Shaw's critique of the substance of all these linguistic distinctions becomes clear, which, rather ironically, points to the fact that, in a perpetuated rigidly stratified society, speech alone cannot reorder one's position within it (Labov, 1966).

- **Phonetic Variation and Social Stratification: The Case of Higgins and Doolittle**

In Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw explores the role of phonetic variation in shaping social identity and reinforcing class distinctions. Professor Henry Higgins, a phonetics expert, views speech as the primary determinant of social status, asserting that proper pronunciation and grammar can elevate an individual within the rigid class hierarchy. Eliza Doolittle's linguistic transformation under his instruction highlights the intersection of language, identity, and social mobility. Higgins demonstrates this perspective early in the play when he states: "I can place her accent. It's a mixture of the two. The English of the lower middle class, and the English of the common people." (Shaw, 1913, Act 1).

This remark underscores how phonetic variation is deeply tied to class perception. Eliza's strong Cockney accent immediately marks her as lower class, a distinction she is acutely aware of when she insists: "I ain't pretending to be deserving. I'm just a poor girl trying to better myself!" (Shaw, 1913, Act 1). Her desire for self-improvement is intricately linked to language, as she recognizes that refined speech is essential for social acceptance. As the play progresses, Higgins' linguistic training reshapes Eliza's speech, culminating in his declaration: "You are a success, Eliza! You speak like a lady now, and the difference is clear." (Shaw, 1913, Act 3). While Higgins views this transformation as a triumph of phonetics, the shift in Eliza's speech also raises questions about authenticity and identity. Her refined pronunciation grants her social entry, yet it does not erase the class-based prejudices ingrained in society. Through the lens of Labov's Principle of Linguistic Variation, Eliza's transformation exemplifies style-shifting, where individuals adjust their speech to navigate different

social contexts (Labov, 1966). However, Shaw critiques the assumption that language alone can dictate one's social standing, illustrating that phonetic refinement, while influential, cannot fully dismantle entrenched class structures.

❖ Style-Shifting and Social Mobility: Higgins as a Linguistic Authority

In Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw presents language as both a tool for social mobility and a barrier reinforcing class distinctions. Professor Higgins, as a linguistic authority, views speech refinement as the key to transforming one's social status. His teachings embody style-shifting, the ability to modify speech based on context, aligning with Labov's sociolinguistic theory (Labov, 1966). Higgins asserts the necessity of precise speech when instructing Eliza: "You are not a flower girl anymore. You're a lady now, and you must speak like one. You must be careful of your vowels, your consonants, and how you enunciate." (Shaw, 1913, Act 2). Eliza, once defined by her Cockney accent, internalizes this linguistic shift, later affirming: "I am a lady now, Professor Higgins. I can speak like one." (Shaw, 1913, Act 3). While Higgins sees this as a linguistic success, Eliza's transformation raises questions about identity and authenticity. Her refined speech allows her access to elite circles, but true social acceptance remains elusive. Shaw critiques the assumption that language alone determines status, highlighting the deeper societal structures that shape class divisions.

❖ Language, Power, and Class Conflict: The Social Implications

In Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw examines the intricate relationship between language, power, and class conflict. Speech serves as both a means of empowerment and a mechanism of control, with Professor Higgins embodying the belief that linguistic refinement equates to social advancement. However, this transformation also reveals the limitations of language in overcoming entrenched class barriers. Higgins asserts his authority over Eliza's transformation, claiming credit for her newfound status: "You have been transformed, Eliza. You no longer speak like a flower girl, and it is because of me that you have this new power." (Shaw, 1913, Act 5). While Higgins views language as a tool of empowerment, his statement underscores the power imbalance between them. Eliza's refined speech grants her entry into elite society, yet it does not afford her true independence. Instead, she remains caught between her past identity and her imposed refinement, highlighting the persistent class conflict. Through the lens of sociolinguistic analysis, Pygmalion critiques the assumption that language alone dictates status. Shaw exposes the deeper social structures that reinforce inequality, demonstrating that while

language can facilitate mobility, it cannot fully erase class distinctions or grant genuine autonomy (Labov, 1966).

- **The Role of Speech as a Marker of Social Class**

In Pygmalion, George Bernard Shaw portrays speech as a defining marker of social class, shaping how individuals are perceived and treated within society. Eliza Doolittle's Cockney accent immediately classifies her as lower-class, reinforcing societal prejudices that associate refined speech with respectability and status. Her struggle to speak properly reflects this rigid social structure: "I ain't pretending to be deserving. I'm just a poor girl trying to better myself!" (Shaw, 1913, Act 2). Eliza's desire for self-improvement through language underscores the belief that speech can serve as a tool for upward mobility. However, Shaw critiques this notion by illustrating that while linguistic refinement may alter outward perceptions, it does not guarantee full acceptance into higher social circles. Through sociolinguistic analysis, Pygmalion highlights how language both reflects and reinforces class divisions. Eliza's transformation raises questions about authenticity and social identity, revealing that speech, though powerful, is not enough to dismantle deep-seated class distinctions.

- **Labov's Concept of Overt Prestige and Covert Prestige in Pygmalion**

William Labov's sociolinguistic concepts of overt and covert prestige provide a nuanced lens for examining Eliza Doolittle's linguistic journey in Pygmalion. Overt prestige is associated with socially approved, standardized language varieties, often linked to education, authority, and social mobility. In contrast, covert prestige refers to the value embedded in non-standard dialects, which convey group solidarity, authenticity, and cultural identity.

Eliza's Cockney accent, emblematic of her working-class roots, carries covert prestige within her native community. Her speech affirms her identity and belonging in a particular social stratum. However, under Higgins' tutelage, she is trained to adopt Received Pronunciation (RP) — the linguistic hallmark of England's upper class — in pursuit of overt prestige. Higgins' assertion that correct pronunciation ensures social elevation reflects this ideology: "You have to learn to pronounce every syllable properly... your speech will reflect your proper place in society" (Shaw, Act II). His belief in linguistic determinism reinforces the idea that language can substitute for class — a notion Shaw ultimately challenges.

As Eliza masters RP and begins to pass as a duchess, she gains superficial acceptance among the elite. Yet, her transformation triggers an existential conflict. Her new speech alienates her from her past, stripping her of the covert prestige rooted in her community and former identity. The loss is not merely linguistic but emotional and psychological. In Act V, Eliza's disillusionment surfaces: "What's to become of me? What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for?" This moment captures the liminal space she now occupies — no longer fully belonging to her old class, yet not authentically integrated into the upper class. The overt prestige she gains fails to offer genuine belonging or respect, exposing the hollowness of class performance based solely on language.

Shaw uses this linguistic tension to critique the performativity of class: the idea that class identity can be constructed through surface markers like accent or attire, but without structural change, such performances remain fragile and superficial. Eliza's internal turmoil underscores the limitations of linguistic assimilation as a vehicle for true social mobility. Labov's theory helps expose this paradox — that in striving for overt prestige, Eliza loses the covert prestige that once grounded her identity, and yet still remains an outsider in both worlds.

William Labov's sociolinguistic concepts of overt prestige and covert prestige help explain the linguistic dynamics in Pygmalion. Overt prestige refers to the social value placed on standard or high-status language, while covert prestige highlights the solidarity and identity associated with non-standard speech. Shaw illustrates this distinction through Eliza Doolittle's transformation and Professor Higgins' insistence on linguistic refinement.

Higgins embodies the ideology of overt prestige when he instructs Eliza: "You have to learn to pronounce every syllable properly, and stress the right vowels and consonants. If you do this, your speech will reflect your proper place in society." (Shaw, 1913, Act 2). For Higgins, proper pronunciation is a marker of higher social standing, reinforcing the idea that refined speech grants access to elite circles. Conversely, Eliza's Cockney accent, despite its low social status, carries covert prestige, as it represents her working-class roots and cultural identity: "I ain't pretending to be deserving. I'm just a poor girl trying to better myself!" (Shaw, 1913, Act 1). As Eliza adopts standard speech, she gains overt prestige but risks losing the covert prestige tied to her identity. Shaw critiques the rigid association between

language and class, illustrating that while linguistic refinement can create opportunities, it does not erase class biases or guarantee true social mobility.

- **Linguistic Identity and the Struggle for Authenticity in Pygmalion**

In Pygmalion, the process of linguistic transformation challenges the notion of authentic identity. Eliza Doolittle's journey from a working-class flower girl with a Cockney accent to a well-spoken lady in high society reflects the deep tension between linguistic adaptation and personal authenticity. While Eliza masters the refined speech taught by Professor Higgins, she struggles with reconciling her newfound linguistic abilities with her original identity. The internal conflict Eliza experiences illustrates the psychological toll of adopting a language that does not fully correspond to one's true self. Eliza's struggle is reflected in her words: "I am a common ignorant girl, and in my station, I have to be respectable. I will do as you say, Professor Higgins." (Shaw, 1913, Act 3). This line underscores her acknowledgment of her humble background, even as she strives to embrace a different identity dictated by her speech. Labov's theory of linguistic relativity (1966) suggests that the language one speaks plays a significant role in shaping one's worldview and self-perception. Eliza's transformation highlights how language, as a social symbol, influences her sense of self and belonging in society, emphasizing that linguistic changes can reshape personal identity but cannot fully resolve the inherent tension between authenticity and adaptation.

- **Language as a Vehicle for Class Critique in Shaw's Pygmalion**

George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion details how language is an instrument of social categorization as well as social mobility, echoing William Labov's sociolinguistic claim that speech variation is inextricably linked to class stratification. "You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days," Professor Higgins says early in the play (Act II), reinforcing the notion that phonological features mark a person's position in such a stratified class hierarchy. This is consistent with Labov's argument that people often stigmatize non-standard dialects, and such dialects are often associated with lower socioeconomic status.

Later still, when Eliza appropriates the phonetic norms of the upper class, her linguistic style threatens these boundaries of that very structure. Higgins' rebuke "The moment I let you sit down in that chair and talk to me as if we were equals, you presume to give yourself airs" (Act V)—indicates the anxiety generated when

linguistic performance upends socially established roles. Post-structurally, Eliza's style-shifting illustrates that language can both reflect and reproduce Viejo class divisions (as with the stylistic voyeurism described above) but also challenge them, destabilizing the legitimacy of class-based linguistic prejudice.

Shaw's Pygmalion is an attack on the social system that links language to class identity. By centering language as a tool for social mobility, Shaw illuminates the deeply rooted class snobberies of early 20th-century England. The linguistic association of such defining nominal characteristics of one's class and setting, the play's main critique that these elements shape a society in which speech becomes a barrier to entry to a range of sites of opportunity and social spaces. Through Eliza's metamorphosis, Shaw interrogates the idea that linguistic polish equates to moral or social polish. Higgins' view that speech has the ability to affect social change is proved flimsy when the superficiality of Eliza's transformation into a lady through language doesn't address the real class struggles, she faces. Shaw's examination of language as a means of both inclusion and exclusion, as well as the limitations based on class that it imposes, is very much in line with Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). According to Bourdieu, to be part of and succeed in a social hierarchy, people have to have certain forms of capital, one of which is language. Though Eliza gains a kind of "linguistic capital," allowing her to momentarily escape her class background, Shaw suggests that language alone cannot transform a person's position in a stratified society.

This study investigates George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion through the lens of William Labov's sociolinguistic theory, with particular focus on language variation, social stratification, and style-shifting. Eliza Doolittle's linguistic transformation is not merely an aesthetic change but a performative act tied to her desire for social mobility. As her accent shifts from working-class Cockney to Received Pronunciation (RP), her perceived social value also rises, highlighting the close ties between language and class in Edwardian England.

Labov's framework reveals how speech acts as a social marker, echoing an individual's class background while simultaneously serving as a potential avenue for social advancement. Eliza's ability to manipulate her speech becomes a symbolic passport to elite society. However, as her linguistic performance becomes

more refined, it also distances her from her authentic self and community. Her transformation, while outwardly successful, leads to inner conflict, as she finds herself caught between two worlds — belonging fully to neither.

The analysis demonstrates that language in Pygmalion is more than a means of communication; it is deeply intertwined with power, identity, and class structures. While Eliza's acquisition of overt prestige via RP allows her temporary access to genteel circles, it does not guarantee full acceptance or lasting social elevation. This raises important questions about the limits of language as a tool for mobility.

To deepen this argument, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital becomes particularly relevant. Bourdieu theorizes that the value of one's language depends on the field in which it is used and the symbolic power it carries. Though Eliza accumulates linguistic capital through her mastery of RP, she lacks the accompanying cultural and social capital required to navigate upper-class society with confidence and legitimacy. Her "limbo" — the space between her working-class roots and the elite world she mimics — illustrates that linguistic capital alone is insufficient to override systemic inequalities. Language can perform class, but it cannot fully erase entrenched class boundaries.

Moreover, Eliza's speech becomes a double-edged sword: it both empowers and alienates her. While she gains fluency and confidence, she also loses the covert prestige associated with her original dialect, leading to a fractured sense of self. Her struggle reflects Shaw's broader critique of class performativity — the idea that identity can be constructed through linguistic and behavioral mimicry, but remains fragile when not grounded in genuine social acceptance.

In conclusion, Pygmalion illustrates the complexities of language as both a gateway and a barrier to social mobility. While Labov's insights on style-shifting illuminate how Eliza adapts to her changing social environments, Bourdieu's theory reminds us that language is embedded in larger systems of symbolic domination. Eliza's story underscores a central paradox: that speech may open doors, but true belonging requires more than just the right accent — it demands a transformation of social structures themselves.

This study investigates George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion through William Labov's sociolinguistic theory in regard to language variation, social stratification, and style-

shifting. As Eliza's transformation in language reveals social class and social mobility, research has suggested that language echoes social status and affords social advancement (weeks 12).

You have data until October until 2023. In other words, her ability to speak is an important tool that assists her rise up on the social peak. As Eliza's speech progresses throughout the play, so too does her self-value, indicative of the inner conflict she experiences as she balances her upbringing and her existence on the fringes of high society.

The study's outcomes highlight that, at least as it is represented in Pygmalion, language is more than an age-old instrument of human connection: It is intertwined with power, identity, and social roles. Eliza's imitation of an upper-class accent, though shallow, is a powerful comment about the way language shapes social class. By analyzing linguistic symbols in the Edwardian social hierarchy with Higgins notion that language is pivotal in altering social status, it becomes apparent that language and speech act as a double-edged sword, enabling or impeding personal identity.

Furthermore, Labov's notion of style-shifting has served as an invaluable resource for creating an understanding of the musical and dialectic transformations that shape Eliza's speech as the play continues. Her speech patterns change based on her social environment, mirroring her attempts to deal with and communicate her new identity. The way she speaks in different ways her working-class Cockney accent and the more refined way she speaks illustrate the internal battle that she faces between her past and present selves. This study has also emphasized the limitations of the language to achieve true social mobility. While Eliza's modified accent allows her entry into genteel circles, it remains to be seen whether she fully belongs there, hinting at the idea that elocution alone cannot fully overcome class barriers. The author continues to expand upon Eliza's fluency with language, but even with all the words she now has at her disposal, she remains torn between who society expects her to be and who she continues to become. In conclusion, Pygmalion touches through the dense subjects of class, identity, unlanguaged.

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