



“My Fair Linguist”: The Interplay of Language Ideology, Gender and Social Class in *My Fair Lady* (1964)

Konstantina (Nina) Triaridou

Language and Gender

Committee for Gender Equality

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH)

From Pygmalion to *My Fair Lady*

- Pygmalion: Ancient myth about a sculptor who carved a woman out of stone, Galatea, and fell in love with his creation.
- The Pygmalion myth has formed the basis for multiple film adaptations, ranging from revered classics such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) to romantic comedies such as Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990).
- Pygmalion's central gender conflict is translated in linguistic terms in George Cukor's *My Fair Lady* (1964).
- Plot: Professor Henry Higgins tries to teach the working-class Cockney-accented Eliza Doolittle the standard linguistic variety of British English, in order for her to access high society during the Edwardian era.



Intersectionality

- Intersectionality is central, since Eliza Doolittle's experience is colored not by her gender, but by her social class that marks her as a working-class woman in London at the start of the 20th century.
- **Intersectionality:** Term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, referring to how other markers of identity such as race, class, ethnicity and sexuality inflect the experience of gender (Schwartz-DuPre, 2012, pp. 177-8).
- Working within a postmodern feminist linguistic framework, I examine how gender and social class are discursively formed and lexically indexed in *My Fair Lady*, all the while highlighting how language ideology functions through linguistic capital.



Lexically Indexing Gender and Class

Henry Higgins: She's a flower girl.

Henry Higgins: What do you want, my girl?

Eliza Doolittle: I know I'm a common, ignorant girl, and you're a book-learned gentleman, but I'm not dirt under your feet.

- Higgins' male perspective as an upper class professor is privileged throughout the film and Higgins' perceived superiority in terms of gender and class is lexically indexed.
- The practice of referentially indexing gender often carries sexist connotations that reflect patriarchal and misogynistic societal bias against women (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 71).
- The gendered aspects of language are inflected by the categories of social class, ethnicity and race (Cameron, 2003, p. 452).
- The word "gentleman", referring to Higgins, indexes both gender and social class, since a gentleman is defined as an honorable man of noble or aristocratic background. But Eliza still reserves the "common girl" label for herself, indexing her perceived "lower" social status as a working-class woman.



Linguistic Capital

- Language ideologies do not simply encourage certain linguistic habits, but also seek to symmetrically order other areas of socio-cultural life (Cameron, 2003, p. 449).
- Linguistic capital: Term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The eloquent use and good knowledge of the official language constitutes linguistic capital within society, providing advantageous societal status and more desirable financial/professional opportunities to speakers of the official variety (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 56).
- Thus, linguistic capital constitutes a form of social inequality, benefiting those who have the financial and educational resources to receive training in the official language, such as Higgins but being detrimental to working class individuals like Eliza.



Linguistic Capital in *My Fair Lady*

*Henry Higgins: Look at her, a prisoner of the gutters
Condemned by every syllable she utters [...]
If you spoke as she does, sir, instead of the way you do
Why, you might be selling flowers, too*

- Higgins demonstrates the power of linguistic capital in determining social class and limiting opportunities.

“In six months I could pass her off as a duchess at an Embassy Ball. I could get her a job as a lady’s maid or a shop assistant which requires better English.”

- Higgins echoes Bourdieu’s view that linguistic capital is related to the job market, since he implies that the knowledge of the standard variety would result in better professional opportunities for Eliza.
- Language and Intersectionality: Not all jobs are open to women, even those belonging to the middle or upper class; Eliza cannot become a professor like Higgins but only a lady’s maid or a shop assistant.



MY FAIR LADY

AUDREY HEPBURN · REX HARRISON



STANLEY HOLLOWAY
WILFRID HYDE-WHITE
GLADYS COOPER JEREMY BURNHAM
THEODORE BIKEL
DALLA COMEDIA DI BERNARD SHAW
PRODOTTORE E COSTUME CECIL BEATON
DIREZIONE SCENICA DI ANDRE PREJEAN
MUSICA DI
FREDERICK LOEWE ALAN JAY LERNER
PRODOTTO DA
JACK L. WARNER GEORGE CUKOR
TECHNICOLOR SUPER PANAVISION

Language Ideology & Standard Variety

Henry Higgins: What could possibly matter more than to take a human being and change her into a different human being by creating a new speech for her? It's filling up the deepest gap that separates class from class.

- Higgins' phrase echoes the Pygmalion myth, since he views Eliza as his own malleable creation.
- Higgins understands how linguistic capital acquires social extensions and believes linguistic capital can be used to enable social mobility, since it is a marker of social class that opens up prospects for Eliza that she could never access as a member of the working class.
- Noble though Higgins' intentions may sound, at the same time his promotion of the dominant linguistic ideology implies his allegiance to the problematic status quo which wishes to socially and linguistically eradicate difference.
- Official institutions, particularly education, task grammarians and teachers with codifying the legitimate language through correction (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 60). Since he is a linguist and a professor, Higgins has power and authority to correct Eliza's "wrong" Cockney accent.
- Through linguistic instruction Higgins does not want to "free" Eliza of her class constraints but rather to neutralize and dominate her as a subject.

Social Class & Linguistic Stereotyping

“Here, take the whole bloomin’ basket for a sixpence!”

“I won’t say those ruddy vowels one more time.”

“Come on, Dover! Move your bloomin’ arse!”

- Before her linguistic transformation to an upper class “lady”, Eliza is linguistically stereotyped as a working-class woman through her use of profanity, a feature that deviates from how patriarchal language ideology conceptualizes proper “feminine” speech.

Gradually, the silent and reserved middle and upper class “proper” woman was juxtaposed with working class women, whose language designated them as vulgar and unruly in the eyes of society (Cameron, 2003, p. 451).

- By negatively stereotyping Eliza’s speech as indicative of working-class femininity, the film reaffirms the supposed superiority of the standard variation over other dialects and demonstrates how social inequality is reflected in and perpetuated through language.



From “common girl” to “lady”

Eliza Doolittle: “We were above that at Covent Garden. [...] I sold flowers, I didn’t sell myself. Now you’ve made a lady of me, I’m not fit to sell anything else.”

- In the end, Eliza conforms to both the linguistic and societal norms of upper class femininity, by adopting the standard linguistic variety.
- Eliza links linguistic practices with her new social reality, by arguing that now that Higgins has “made a lady of [her, she is] not fit to sell anything else” but herself by marrying into a rich upper class family. Though her new linguistic capital allows for her class mobility, her gender limits her prospects to marriage.
- Language perpetuates gender and social inequality.



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