Mackenzie McAnear

1 May 2022

The Language of *Pygmalion*

The critical research on Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* from 1951 to 2014, showed trends in the topics criticized and how they differ over the decades. Sources at first centered around language, then gender, which led into class. Shaw's use of language was a point of examination for many sources—because it was what he was known for—thought about Shaw's use of language not just within the play itself but also in the process of creating the play. After looking at each topic's trajectory over time, language was the most common topic thread discussed. Language plays a significant role in *Pygmalion* as both a theme and concept, which is why this paper will be dissecting the language of *Pygmalion* and how the importance of language affects the other aspects of the play, such as class and gender.

The critics have found language to be an essential part of this play from the beginning, so it is crucial to understand how the importance of language changed over the years. In her article "Shaw, subjective inequality, and the social meanings of language in *Pygmalion*," Lynda Mugglestone states, "upon some consideration of the wider social, linguistic, and perhaps more particularly, sociolinguistic, contexts upon which it draw[n]" Shaw himself has openly admitted that he is using linguistics to satirize the arbitrary norms of the Victorian social class (374). Bernard Shaw states in his preface, "it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him," and he stresses "the social meanings subsumed within language, and especially spoken language" (Mugglestone 375). Language was, and still is, an essential part of the conversation. The use of language to identify

and classify an individual, as presented in *Pygmalion*, is as relevant today as in George Bernard

Shaw's day. Whether fair or not, it seems human nature to make assumptions about a person's

education and status based on how they present themselves verbally. Poor grammar or

pronunciation by an individual is an invitation to draw certain conclusions.

Higgins takes a "guttersnipe" and turns her into a duchess, all by changing how she talks

(Shaw 2.142). Changes in the social structure "bring the new and socially connotative values

surrounding accent in their wake, the escalation in its social significance being more than

apparent in contemporary comment; whereas for Joseph Priestley in 1762 pro-nunciation had

been merely an 'ornament' of correct speech, for William Savage writing in 1833 its role as

determiner of social identity is well established" (Mugglestone 375). For example, Eliza says the

phrase "done her in" eloquently; but, it was the words she used that needed revision (Shaw

3.175).

The dialect is where people make snap judgment calls, which is what Higgins would be at

fault for because of his profession. Higgins is a product of his profession and of the time in

England. When first meeting Eliza, he says, "a woman who utters such depressing and disgusting

sounds has no right to be anywhere—no right to live" (Shaw 1.209-210). Today, people are still a

product of their environment, but their environments have grown to encompass more diversity

and willingness to accept. It is unclear if England is still class-conscious now, but back in the

period when *Pygmalion* was written, it was very strict with class hierarchies. "Shaw extended the

term [phonetics] to include not only the study and knowledge of speech sounds but also their

pedagogical use and social importance. For Higgins, the title 'professor of phonetics'

incorporates using phonetic knowledge to teach speakers how to adapt a new accent; in today's

parlance, his expertise in 'Applied Linguistics' lets him teach Eliza Doolittle [...] to become 'bidialectical' or at least 'bi-accented.'" (Saur 36). Higgins and Eliza understand the social class implications of her speech transformation; in reality, their aim in altering her pronunciation is specifically to improve her social standing.

Pygmalion is all about judging people on how they speak and then making the claim that you can take someone from the gutter and train him or her to speak proper, "formal" English, thus conceivably passing the person off as someone from a higher social class than that in which he or she was born; it is a simple matter of training the person to transform his or her street talk to a highly evolved and crafted language. It became clear that what was needed was more than just the proper pronunciation and enunciation of Eliza's words. In other words, as important as how it sounded coming out, what was equally important was what was coming out. This criterion is confirmed in Eliza's dialogue when she says that she is amongst the upper class and has "done her in" (Shaw 3.175). This expression is said eloquently but with the wrong words among the wrong type of people. She still uses the vernacular and slang of where she came from and not of where she is currently as a fellow lady among the upper class. The language of upper-level society is not known for including slang. She reverted to slang because that is where she is from, so Higgins had to do further work to remove that from Eliza's vernacular.

Once Eliza was elevated to this new level of speech and presentation, she had a new dilemma; since she was a fake, she did not belong, and she had no way to remove herself from her new status and station. English culture, being what it was during this time, means that Eliza had few options. It was presented in the play that Eliza was in a position to have to marry Freddy. She had to hitch her star to a man who could elevate her and let her continue in this new

world where she had been thrust. Most of the speculation around the idea that Eliza should have ended up with Higgins was all fantasy. The concept of enemies to lovers spurred this idea in readers' minds. Shaw had no intention of having Higgins and Eliza wind up together. He was adamantly against this idea. The audience wanted this union, not Shaw; the manner in which the musical version of the play is presented leads the audience to root for this union and also, the way it is presented in the musical version of the play, they bring some of the tension that leads the audience to root for that to happen. "He primarily objected to the absence of language in silent film and what he later would perceive to be the limited role of dialogue in the talkies. For Shaw language was the essence of his art. To erase language would be to eradicate not simply the artists medium, but the artist himself" (McFarland 31). The ending also does a small quantity of fan service to that end because Eliza shows back up at Higgins's place and he cockily says "where are my damn slippers," it gives the viewer the impression that maybe there will be something between them when all this is said and done.

However, Shaw knew Eliza's ending up with Higgins would not help her. The role of accent in Pygmalion is important for Shaw's social critique. Eliza's transformation by Henry Higgins reflects Shaw's understanding of how language details can create barriers and mirror social inequality. This highlights the significance of linguistic inequality and its impact on social divisions (Mugglestone 375). Higgins is way too old for her, and he does not treat women with respect. He is a bachelor stuck in his ways of the upper-crust English society. He does not deserve the jewel that Eliza has become. Like the Greek myth, in that sense, the sculptor did not deserve what he had created; Higgins does not deserve this new and improved Eliza he had created.

Higgins did not change people's perception of Eliza because she was introduced to new people who did not know her in her previous life. However, Freddy, his sister, and his mom encounter Eliza at the very opening of the play when she is a poor flower girl. Later, after Eliza had been working with Higgins for a while, they cross paths again, and Freddy and his family do not even recognize Eliza as the flower girl they first met. The irony later on, when they reconnect, is that the sister is taken in by this lovely lady who wants to be her best friend. She is even amused in a good way by some of the adequately delivered slang Eliza uses.

Shaw was aware that "phonetics, though still a 'new science', was in fact potentially far more than the mere study of articulation and voice production, and it was precisely its potential for playing a social role which was, in strikingly similar ways, to interest them both. As a result, Sweet can in a number of ways be seen to provide not only the model for Higgins, but also the impetus for the entire play. [...] 'When a firm control of pronunciation has thus been acquired, provincialisms and vulgarisms will at last be eliminated and some of the most important barriers between the different classes of society will thus be abolished.' *Pygmalion* can, in effect, be seen as Shaw's response; as Higgins himself phrases it in the play-thereby closely echoing Sweet in his perceptions-pronunciation, no longer merely an ornament, is instead 'the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul'" (Mugglestone 375-6).

"Socially we are what we sound like, and if we can change our voices we change ourselves', or rather, and perhaps rather more accurately, we can change how others perceive us, even if we do happen to belong, at least originally, to that social substratum of the cockney" (Mugglestone 381). Whether it is then or now, language plays a significant role in *Pygmalion* as

both a theme and concept. Shaw's play raises issues about language, social class, and the

relationships between the sexes that continue to be relevant and thought-provoking.

Works Cited

Crane, Milton. "Pygmalion: Bernard Shaw's Dramatic Theory and Practice." *PMLA*, vol. 66, no.

6, Modern Language Association, 1951, pp. 879–85, https://doi.org/10.2307/460146.

Mugglestone, Lynda. "Shaw, subjective inequality, and the social meanings of language in

Pygmalion." The Review of English Studies 44.175 (1993): 373-385. https://

www.jstor.org/stable/517281.

Gallardo, Bárbara Cristina. "'Why can′t women talk like a man?': an investigation of gender in

the play Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw." (2001).

Kennell, Vicki R. "Pygmalion as narrative bridge between the centuries*." SHAW The Annual of

Bernard Shaw Studies* 25.1 (2005): 73-81. doi:https://doi.org/10.1353/shaw.2005.0012

McFarland, Douglas. "Playful Banter in Shaw's Pygmalion." *Modern British Drama on Screen*,

edited by R. Barton Palmer and William Robert Bray, Cambridge University Press, 2013,

pp. 31-43. EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?

direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=mzh&AN=201 4581327&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Saur, Pamela S. "George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion and Contemporary Linguistics." Lamar

Journal of the Humanities, vol. 39, no. 1, 2014, pp. 35–41. EBSCOhost, https://

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=mzh&AN=201

6700620&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Shaw, George Bernard. "Pygmalion." *The Norton Anthology of Drama*, edited by J. Ellen Gainor,

Stanton B. Garner Jr., Martin Puchner, 3rd ed., vol. 2, W. W. Norton & Company, New

York, 2018, pp. 411–472.