
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sociolinguistic Perspectives on English Phonetic Dialects: A Case Study of *My Fair Lady*

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ABSTRACT

The study provides a sociolinguistic analysis of British English dialects, focusing on the phonetic variations depicted in the film *My Fair Lady*. It reveals how dialects and accents serve as indicators of social class and mobility, as illustrated by the character Eliza Doolittle's transformation from Cockney to Received Pronunciation (RP). Key findings include the impact of phonetic features, such as vowel shifts and consonant omissions, on social perception and the role of intonation and grammar in signaling social status. The research underscores the significance of language as a tool for social ascent and the complex interplay between linguistic authenticity and societal expectations. The study's outcomes contribute to the understanding of language variation as a reflection of and influence on social dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Sociolinguistics; *My Fair Lady*; Phonetics; Language Variation

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1. Introduction

My Fair Lady, a 1964 American musical film directed by George Cukor, is a remarkable adaptation of the eponymous Broadway musical by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, which, in turn, is based on George Bernard Shaw's celebrated play *Pygmalion*. The story follows Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl living in the streets of London, whose life is transformed by Professor Henry Higgins, a linguistics expert who teaches her how to speak with a refined accent, thereby elevating her social status. This transformation, though primarily focused on language acquisition, reflects the social dynamics and class structures of early 20th-century British society.

The film presents a vivid portrayal of British social class divisions, which were deeply ingrained in the cultural and linguistic landscape of the time. British society placed great emphasis on the correlation between one's speech and their social standing. Accents and dialects were significant indicators of a person's social class, education, and occupation. The aristocracy and upper middle class spoke Received Pronunciation (RP), a non-regional accent that was associated with education, wealth, and cultural refinement. In contrast, individuals from working-class backgrounds often spoke with regional accents that were perceived as less prestigious or even "vulgar" (Jiang Hongliu, 2005).

Through Professor Higgins' training, Eliza's transformation underscores the central role of language as a tool for social mobility. Her ability to acquire RP and pass as a "lady" highlights the social construct of class and the power of language in determining one's societal worth. In the context of *My Fair Lady*, language becomes not just a means of communication but a marker of class, identity, and power. The film also explores the tension between linguistic authenticity and social aspiration, providing a nuanced commentary on the complexities of cultural assimilation and social mobility.

In sociolinguistic terms, language is more than a neutral means of communication; it is intricately tied to social identity, status, and power. Sociolinguistics, as a field of study, explores the dynamic relationship between language and society. American linguist

William Labov (1966) famously argued that language is a reflection of social structures and that social factors such as class, gender, age, and ethnicity play a crucial role in shaping linguistic behavior. This paper will examine the linguistic variation portrayed in *My Fair Lady*, with a particular focus on how Eliza's speech reflects and interacts with the social classes of London, highlighting the complex ways in which language shapes and is shaped by social dynamics.

2. Literature Review

Language variation is a central concern in sociolinguistics, as it reveals how language reflects and shapes social identity, class, and cultural background. "Variability" is recognized as one of the fundamental characteristics of language. Edward Sapir (1985) argued that language is inherently variable, with even individuals within the same community exhibiting differences in their speech habits. One of the most significant features of language is its sociality, as all studied languages contain varying degrees of linguistic variation (Qi Zhiqiang, 2014). Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968) were pioneers in articulating the concept of "language variation", examining its nature and establishing research methodologies. Their work laid the groundwork for the study of language change as a dynamic process influenced by social factors, and they proposed five key questions in the study of language change: constraints, transitions, embeddability, evaluation, and realization.

The phenomena of language variation and change are now widely recognized in linguistics. Several theoretical insights have emerged, including: (1) natural language systems are orderly heterogeneous, meaning language variation is structured and purposeful; (2) explanations of linguistic phenomena must account for all relevant linguistic data, a principle known as "the principle of accountability"; and (3) ongoing language change is continuous and universal, with research methods developed to observe and predict such changes in real time (Xu Daming, 2006).

Research on phonetic variation typically focuses on three levels: vowels, consonants, and suprasegmental features. Mitchell and Delbridge (1965) investigated the social correlates of vowel variation in Australian English, while Labov et al. (1968) advanced the analysis of vowel inventories in American English dialects. Moreton and Thomas (2007) examined how word-final consonants influence the height of preceding vowels in Canadian English. Fischer (1958) made key contributions to consonant variation, particularly in gender-based differences in the frequency of consonantal variants like the word-final "-ing" form [n] versus [ŋ]. Research on fricative variation has also contributed to understanding consonantal variation, including studies in English (Cole & Cooper, 1975) and Spanish (Widdison, 1997). Studies of tonal and prosodic variation are rarer but crucial for understanding sociophonetic variation. For instance, Nguyen & Edmondson (Nguyen & Edmondson, 1998) found that voice quality in Vietnamese correlates with tonal categories, while Hyman (Hyman, 2017) highlighted tonal distinctions in Bantu languages.

The social factors most strongly associated with language variation include gender, age, social class, ethnicity, and race (Xu Daming, 1997). These factors influence phonetic variation in diverse ways. Al-Wer (2002) found that highly educated individuals tend to be at the forefront of dialectal innovations. Finn (2004) explored the phonological uniqueness of Cape Flats English, shaped by the region's historical and social contexts. Starr (2015) analyzed how Japanese women adjust their speech features, such as pitch and volume, to conform to social expectations of femininity.

3. Language Variation in My Fair Lady

Language variation refers to the different forms of a single language that emerge under the influence of various factors such as geography, social class, cultural background, and others. These variations manifest in aspects such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and language usage. Researchers primarily explain language variation through social behavior, thus revealing the relationship and causal connections between social structure and linguistic structure (Guo Jun, 2009).

In the film *My Fair Lady*, the character Eliza Doolittle demonstrates a significant transition from the Cockney dialect of East London to RP, a process that deeply reflects the interaction between language acquisition and social mobility. The Cockney dialect, as a non-standard variety of London speech, is characterized by features such as vowel substitutions, consonant omissions, and the simplification of consonant clusters, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the standard RP pronunciation.

3.1 Phonetics

Phonetic variation is one of the most prominent features of dialect differences. Cockney, the dialect spoken by Eliza and her father, is characterized by distinct phonological features such as vowel shifts, consonant omissions, and consonant cluster simplifications. For example, the vowel "a" is often pronounced as [aɪ] or [i:] in Cockney, whereas RP speakers use the [eɪ] sound. Eliza's early pronunciation of the word "lady" as /'laidi/ instead of /'leɪdi/ is a classic example of Cockney vowel substitution. Similarly, Eliza's father, Alfred P. Doolittle, pronounces "take" as [taɪk] rather than [teɪk].

One notable feature of Cockney is the omission of the initial [h] in words. In the famous line "In Hartford, Hereford, and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen," Eliza omits the [h] in "Hartford" and pronounces "ever" as ['evə] instead of ['hevə]. Cockney

speakers also exhibit th-fronting, where the “th” sound [θ] is replaced by [f] or [v], as seen in the Cockney pronunciation of “think” as [fɪŋk].

RP, by contrast, is characterized by precise and deliberate pronunciation, with clear enunciation of consonants and vowels. The contrast between Eliza’s Cockney speech and her later RP speech demonstrates the power of phonetic variation as a marker of social status. The transformation of Eliza’s accent under Professor Higgins’ tutelage reflects not just a shift in pronunciation but also an attempt to alter her social identity. The phonetic shift from Cockney to RP symbolizes her ascent from the working class to the upper class, where linguistic precision is a hallmark of cultural and social refinement.

3.2 Intonation

Intonation, the rise and fall of pitch in speech, is another important feature of language variation. In *My Fair Lady*, intonation patterns serve as an indicator of social class. Lower-class characters like Eliza tend to use irregular or non-standard stress patterns, while upper-class characters like Professor Higgins speak with a more controlled, refined intonation. For example, Eliza’s intonation in the phrase “How kind of you” is initially harsh and erratic, reflecting her lower-class background and lack of formal education. As her training progresses, however, her intonation becomes more measured and refined, mirroring her social ascent.

The shift in Eliza’s intonation highlights the role of speech patterns in signaling social status. In many ways, intonation functions as an invisible but powerful tool of class distinction, subtly influencing how individuals are perceived and evaluated by others. In the context of *My Fair Lady*, intonation acts as a social marker, distinguishing the working class from the elite. The film thus explores how speech, and particularly intonation, can shape an individual’s social identity and influence their social mobility.

3.3 Grammar

The film frequently illustrates Eliza’s use of non-standard or incorrect grammar, such as her expression “done her in” when referring to her aunt’s death, or her use of double negatives, as in “I ain’t done nothing wrong” instead of the standard “I have done nothing wrong.” The use of double negatives, such as “I don’t want to have no truck with him,” appears redundant and unnatural, highlighting the protagonist’s low level of education and her social standing.

Social class, as a fundamental category within social structure, exerts a profound influence on an individual’s language use. The upper class, particularly Professor Henry Higgins, exhibits linguistic features that are emblematic of the use of RP. RP is considered a symbol of social status and educational attainment; its pronunciation is clear, standardized, and adheres to traditional phonetic norms, reflecting the speaker’s background in formal linguistic education. In terms of vocabulary, the upper class tends to favor a broad, precise, and academically rich lexicon, with grammatically rigorous structures that follow traditional syntactic rules, thereby demonstrating linguistic refinement and accuracy. Furthermore, the language of the upper class also encompasses a wealth of social and ceremonial expressions, underscoring their educational background and social manners. In contrast, working-class characters, such as Eliza Doolittle and Alfred P. Doolittle, use language that is deeply rooted in the Cockney dialect. Working-class language frequently features slang, abbreviations, and colloquial expressions, reflecting the impact of their everyday linguistic environment and educational background. Their grammar tends to be more simplified, often characterized by non-standard word order and the omission of auxiliary verbs, which aligns with the practical communication needs of the lower social strata.

Language variation not only serves as an expression of personal identity but also acts as a key indicator of social status and social mobility. Eliza’s transition from the Cockney dialect to RP symbolizes her upward mobility from the lower class to the upper class. This process involves not only an enhancement of linguistic skills but also reflects the combined influence of societal expectations, educational opportunities, and individual agency.

4. Language Attitudes and Perceptions

Language attitudes are the perceptions and judgments individuals hold about different dialects and accents. These attitudes are influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors and can have significant implications for individuals’ social identities and social mobility. In *My Fair Lady*, the characters’ attitudes toward language reflect their social standing and class biases. Professor Higgins, for example, holds RP in high regard, viewing it as the epitome of linguistic purity and cultural sophistication. He demonstrates clear prejudice against regional accents, particularly Cockney, which he deems inferior and “vulgar.”

Eliza’s own language attitude evolves over the course of the film. Initially, she is unaware of the significance of her speech, but as she begins to understand the connection between language and social status, she grows increasingly conscious of her accent and strives to improve it. Her transformation highlights the role of language in shaping self-perception and social identity. As Eliza learns to speak more like the upper class, she begins to see herself differently, perceiving her language as a pathway to social ascent. This shift in her language attitude demonstrates how language is not just a tool for communication but a powerful means of shaping one’s social identity.

5. Sociocultural Implications

The transformation of Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* highlights the relationship between language and social class, showing how language can both reflect and shape an individual's social position. Eliza's journey from Cockney to RP mirrors her ascent from the working class to the upper class, underscoring the social function of language as a marker of social status. However, her transformation also raises questions about cultural authenticity and the costs of social mobility.

As Eliza acquires RP, she gains access to higher social circles, but she also loses aspects of her working-class identity. The film thus explores the tension between social aspiration and cultural authenticity, illustrating the complexities of cultural assimilation. While language is a tool for social mobility, it also reflects the power dynamics and cultural values that shape societal norms. Through Eliza's transformation, *My Fair Lady* presents a nuanced critique of social class and the role of language in negotiating one's place in society.

6. Conclusion

My Fair Lady offers a rich sociolinguistic analysis of language, class, and social mobility. The film illustrates how language serves as both a reflection and a mechanism of social identity, with accent and dialect acting as powerful markers of social status. Eliza Doolittle's transformation from Cockney to RP symbolizes her ascent from the lower to the upper class, demonstrating the pivotal role of language in shaping personal and societal outcomes. At the same time, the film also critiques the pressures of cultural assimilation and the loss of authenticity that often accompanies social mobility.

While the analyses in this paper are primarily theoretical, future research could expand upon this by incorporating audio recordings of the phonetic variations in *My Fair Lady*. Using software such as Praat, a more detailed experimental phonetic analysis could be conducted, focusing on the specific phonetic features that undergo particular types of variation. Through such an approach, future studies would provide deeper insight into the complex relationship between language, identity, and social class, further exploring the intricate ways in which linguistic variation intersects with social structure and personal identity.

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