

## Language attitudes – Movie Critique

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“**My Fair Lady**”, the Academy Award winning 1964 adaptation of George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion would, perhaps, stand out as **one of the most classic illustrations of Sociolinguistics on screen**. The movie highlights the implications that one’s language bear to the society and vice versa. It also highlights how one’s language can elevate a person’s stature in the eyes of a particular society and also as to how one set of people can look down upon another purely based on one’s language. Now coming to the analysis of the aspects of the language attitude wheel that are interwoven in the movie, I would like to focus on the four aspects, namely – **Geography, Social Patterns, Economics and Education**.

In the movie, Eliza Doolittle played by Audrey Hepburn is a part of the working class of London who use the slang named Cockney, a dialect of English, which is also used to refer to the group of people who inhabit the ‘labour areas’ that are traditionally accounted to be within the ear shot of the St Mary-le-Bow church in Cheapside in the City of London. Professor Higgins on the other side is an expert phonetician hailing from the upper middle class/high class societies of London. Now it is to be noted how the **geographical** aspects of the city are interconnected to the language they speak. London, as we know, is a city rich in diversity even within it’s own people as almost every area has an accent/dialect of it’s own, which a native speaker would be able to spot perfectly. Eliza’s livelihood and neighborhood centers around the economically backward areas of London, such as Shoreditch, Hoxton, Stepney and people from such areas, who constitute the working class of London, speak their own accent Cockney. This is the aspect that made Mrs. Pearson, Prof. Higgins’ housekeeper, to understand that Eliza was not of educated or rich upbringing and that is what makes her hesitantly let Col.Pickering and

Prof. Higgins' know that a person of such background has come to meet them in the beginning of the movie. Eliza's language and her costumes make it obvious that she is not someone from their locality and her mannerisms further add to the woes when Mrs. Pearson confirms that she is a flower selling girl from the Cockney areas of London, something that the British high-class tend to look down upon, because of languacultural aspects. In this aspect, Mrs. Pearson's instantaneous reaction to Eliza highlights not only other cultural aspects, but brings to the fore the geo-languacultural aspects of the London society, as to people deciding upon their manners to someone based on the area they hail from.

The next classic example would be the **economic** difference. While Mrs. Pearson and Prof. Higgins are people who are willing to spend money on jewels and clothes for Eliza, Eliza's father is someone who is not interested in taking his daughter back but is willing to sell her for 5 Pounds. When questioned about his loose morals, Mr. Alfred Doolittle himself confesses that '**He can't afford 'em**' by which he refers to his morals. This not only highlights his miserable economic condition but highlights as to how one's language and economic condition are interwoven. Lack of proper education and penury can alter a man's language and though the quality of an accent is purely a matter of perception, one can arguably say that the speech variety not confirming to standard versions and the ones most deviant from the standards usually take a hit in terms of respectability.

It is also to be noted as to how varying levels of **education** lead to different accents or perhaps a deviation from the standard norms. Eliza pronouncing the vowels a, e, i, o, u in a ghastly manner adds to the woes of the well-educated Prof. Higgins who thinks that certain sounds should be produced as per the standard version that everyone gets to learn in schools. While Cockney is not taught in schools, Prof. Higgins' variant is and this to him is what is 'standard'. Prof. Higgins trying to stress on the pronunciation of 'Spain,

plain, rain, main' are all indicators of how an educated Englishman is supposed to speak and since education is also one of the most significant aspects of a society, his efforts are to make Eliza perfect the standard accent so that she would appear educated before the audience in the Embassy ball.

The most prominent aspect that stands out in the movie is the **social aspect** of the languaculture that exists as a demarcating line between the standard British accent and the Cockney accent. There are several aspects that are shown in the movie. Things as trivial as Eliza singing the following lines: "*All I want is a room somewhere, Far away from the cold night air, With one enormous chair, Oh, wouldn't it be lovely*" and the fact that Eliza asks if the hot water bath tub prepared for her was for drinking stand out as aspects that divide the society on a variety of lines. It should be noted as to how Eliza, who was singing and dancing and being a part of the Cockney society is not even being able to be spotted when she returns, not only because of her costumes, but also because of her mannerisms and language which makes the person whom she danced with ask her if he could help her out in the morning hours. Embracing a different language variant not only lead Eliza to the London elite coterie but also made it so impossible for her to get back to where she actually belonged to. If not for her language, I personally think that she could have simply switched between these societies with effortless ease.

As a concluding remark, I would wish to summarize by saying that apart from costumes, gender and other prominent features, the most governing aspect of social acceptance in terms of Sociolinguistics would be the spoken language, which is greatly demonstrated by the classic "My Fair Lady".

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