

Sociophonetic Markers of Social Mobility in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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Abstract

Language operates not only as a communicative tool but also as a marker of class and a gateway to social mobility. This study examines how phonetic change and idiolectal shift function as determinants of social mobility in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Using a qualitative textual analysis design, the play is read through sociophonetic theory integrated with sociological criticism, Marxist literary criticism, and Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital. Data were drawn from dialogues, phonetic spellings, and character interactions that reveal pronunciation change, idiolectal development, and class relations, then interpreted in three stages: identification, interpretation, and synthesis. The analysis shows that Shaw represents accent as a decisive marker of class, with Eliza Doolittle's Cockney speech initially fixing her working class position and shaping others' perceptions of her. Through Higgins's phonetic training, Eliza acquires not only a prestigious accent but a broader idiolectal shift in vocabulary, communicative style, and confidence, functioning as linguistic capital that grants her temporary access to elite society. However, language alone cannot dissolve structural inequality: Eliza continues to face uncertainty about identity, independence, and full social acceptance. *Pygmalion* thus portrays language as both an instrument of empowerment and a mechanism that reproduces class hierarchy.

Keywords

Sociophonetics; Social Mobility; Phonetic Variation; Accent and Class; Literary Sociolinguistics; *Pygmalion*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language reflects not only what a person communicates but also who that person is understood to be within a given social order. Speech influences first impressions, professional relationships, and access to education and employment long before a listener has evaluated the actual content of what is said. Pronunciation, vocabulary, and manner of speaking convey information about regional origin, educational attainment, and social class, so that speech operates simultaneously as a medium of interaction and as a marker that shapes access to opportunity (Levon et al., 2021). Language is a vital medium for communication and a basic modality for human connection across diverse contexts. It consists of systematically structured words and expressions that are conveyed through various forms,



including speaking, writing, and gesturing (Bisri, Aisyah, and Hastuti, 2025). Sociophonetics, the branch of sociolinguistics concerned with the social meaning of speech sounds, explains why accent so often carries more interpretive weight than the words it delivers: rather than treating pronunciation as a purely linguistic phenomenon, it examines how features such as accent, intonation, and rhythm are shaped by social factors and interpreted by listeners as signals of identity, belonging, and status (Docherty, 2022).

A central concept within this field is phonetic variation, the systematic difference in pronunciation among speakers or groups of speakers. Variation of this kind is a normal feature of every living language and reflects regional, social, and individual difference rather than linguistic error; speakers from different communities routinely pronounce the same words differently while remaining fully intelligible to one another. Yet such differences are rarely evaluated neutrally. Certain accents accrue prestige because of a historical association with education, authority, and economic power, while others are stigmatised as markers of restricted opportunity, so that accent becomes entangled with class distinction independent of any actual difference in communicative competence (Donnelly et al., 2022). This evaluative asymmetry is best explained through the notion of language ideology: the socially constructed beliefs that assign legitimacy to some varieties and inferiority to others, beliefs that reflect the status of their speakers rather than any property of the sounds themselves (Lippi-Green, 2012).

Alongside variation across groups, every speaker develops an idiolect, a distinctive personal way of speaking shaped by family background, education, and social interaction. Because language is dynamic rather than static, an idiolect may change substantially over a person's life as new environments and communicative demands arise, such change, sometimes described as style shifting or linguistic adaptation, demonstrates that speakers actively use language as a resource for negotiating identity and social relationships rather than passively reproducing a fixed personal system (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016). The concept of idiolectal shift accordingly refers to significant, sustained changes in an individual's characteristic speech, encompassing not only pronunciation but also vocabulary, grammatical preference, conversational strategy, and overall communicative confidence. Such shifts may bring genuine advantages in access and self presentation, but they can equally generate internal tension, since a speaker who adapts to new social expectations may feel increasingly distant from the community in which the original idiolect was formed.

These linguistic processes matter directly for social mobility, understood as the movement of individuals between social positions through changes in education, occupation, income, or recognition (Goldthorpe, 2016). Although economic resources are conventionally treated as the primary determinant of mobility, sociological and sociolinguistic research increasingly recognises that language itself functions as a resource shaping access to opportunity: speakers whose pronunciation aligns with

prestige norms are routinely judged more competent, trustworthy, and employable than equally qualified speakers whose accent marks them as regional or working class (Donnelly et al., 2019). Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital formalises this insight by treating language as a form of symbolic capital whose value is set by the social field in which it circulates; command of the linguistic forms recognised as legitimate by dominant groups yields credibility and access, while deviation from those forms can produce exclusion regardless of a speaker's underlying ability (Bourdieu, 1991).

Literature has long dramatised this relationship between speech, identity, and class, and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* remains one of its most influential renderings. The play follows Eliza Doolittle, a Covent Garden flower seller whose Cockney pronunciation immediately marks her as working class and shapes how every other character treats her before she has had the chance to demonstrate her intelligence or character. Under the phonetic instruction of Professor Henry Higgins, she gradually replaces the phonetic and idiolectal features associated with her origins with forms considered socially prestigious, acquiring not only a new accent but a broader linguistic identity that grants her entry into social spaces earlier closed to her. Yet Shaw resists any simple narrative of upward mobility achieved through speech alone: although Eliza's pronunciation and idiolect change completely, her sense of identity, independence, and belonging remains unresolved at the play's end, suggesting that linguistic transformation can outpace the social structures that would need to change alongside it.

Previous scholarship on *Pygmalion* has examined gender, class conflict, and Shaw's critique of Edwardian society, and studies of the play's language have specifically illuminated how Shaw exploits dialect and stylistic variation as a device for social commentary, contrasting Eliza's speech before and after her training to expose the arbitrary standards by which speakers are judged (Qadha, 2019). Such studies confirm that language functions as a central organising device in the play, yet they generally treat accent and class as a stable symbolic relationship rather than examining phonetic change and idiolectal shift as linked processes unfolding across the narrative and interacting with a wider apparatus of social and economic capital. This gap motivates the present study, which asks two questions: first, how does Shaw represent phonetic and idiolectal change as markers of class distinction; and second, how do these linguistic changes enable or constrain Eliza's social mobility. To address these questions, sociophonetic analysis is combined with sociological criticism, which situates the play within the historical conditions of Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Marxist literary criticism, which explains how language functions within structures of class and power (Eagleton, 2002). The study also draws on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital to explain how prestigious pronunciation operates as a resource that can be exchanged for social recognition. Together, these perspectives allow the study to show that Shaw treats speech not merely as dialogue but as a

determinant of opportunity, identity, and inequality, a relationship that continues to resonate wherever accent still shapes judgements of competence and belonging in contemporary professional and educational settings (Sharma et al., 2022).

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design suited to the interpretive analysis of a literary text, foregrounding meaning, interpretation, and context over numerical measurement, and remaining sensitive to the cultural and historical setting in which the text was produced (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative textual analysis was chosen as the primary method because it allows examination of how specific linguistic choices construct meaning, characterisation, and social commentary, and because accent, idiolect, and social judgement are inherently interpretive rather than quantifiable phenomena (Flick, 2022). The primary data source is George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), comprising dialogues, phonetic representations, character interactions, and narrative situations that illustrate phonetic variation, idiolectal shift, and social mobility, selected for their direct bearing on the study's two research questions. Secondary data were drawn from peer reviewed sources on sociophonetics, accent and social evaluation, linguistic capital, and literary sociolinguistics. Three complementary lenses were applied throughout: sociophonetic analysis, which explains how pronunciation shapes social perception and provides the vocabulary to describe Eliza's phonetic and idiolectal transformation (Docherty, 2022); sociological criticism, which situates the play within the historical class structure of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, and Marxist criticism, informed by Eagleton (2002) and by Bourdieu's (1991) account of linguistic capital, which explains how command of a prestigious accent functions as social power and exposes the ideological assumptions, dramatised through Higgins's judgements of Eliza, that equate refined speech with personal worth.

Data collection proceeded through repeated close reading to identify passages demonstrating phonetic variation, accent based judgement, idiolectal development, and shifts in how Eliza is treated across the narrative, which were then classified according to the study's two research questions. The analysis followed three stages consistent with standard qualitative literary procedure (Creswell & Creswell, 2018): identification of relevant textual evidence, interpretation of that evidence through the sociophonetic, sociological, and Marxist lenses in turn, so that each passage is read simultaneously as a linguistic event and a moment of social judgement, and synthesis, integrating the separate interpretations into a coherent account that addresses each research question directly rather than surveying isolated scenes. To strengthen credibility, the study applied theoretical triangulation, cross checking textual evidence against established sociophonetic theory and recent empirical scholarship on accent bias, linguistic capital, and social mobility, so that conclusions rest on convergent literary and

theoretical support rather than a single reading strategy.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Accent and Phonetic Variation as Markers of Class Distinction

The first research question concerns how Shaw represents phonetic and idiolectal change as signs of class. From her first appearance, Eliza Doolittle is identified through pronunciation rather than description. Rather than introducing her through physical detail or biographical explanation, Shaw allows the reader to infer her social position directly from the sound of her speech, rendered through non-standard phonetic spelling: "*Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah.*" (Shaw, 1913). The omitted consonants, altered vowels, and contracted forms are not incidental stylistic flourishes, they are phonetic representations that let a reader hear Eliza's accent on the page, and, in sociophonetic terms, they communicate her social position before she has said anything that reveals her character (Docherty, 2022). This is consistent with the broader sociophonetic claim that pronunciation carries social meaning independently of the content of an utterance (Donnelly et al., 2022), and it shows Shaw exploiting that principle for characterisation: society reads Eliza's status off her vowels alone, well before it has any evidence of her intelligence, honesty, or ambition.

Shaw reinforces this principle through Professor Higgins, whose professional expertise lies precisely in decoding geographic and social origin from speech. Higgins boasts, "*I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.*" (Shaw, 1913). This claim dramatises the variationist premise, developed by Labov (1972), that pronunciation is not random but systematically tied to the community in which a speaker was raised; individuals from similar social and geographic environments tend to share phonetic features because language develops within, and is transmitted by, specific speech communities. Eliza's accent, in other words, is a social artefact rather than a personal deficiency, a product of her upbringing in Covent Garden rather than any lack of ability, and Higgins's confidence testifies to how thoroughly Edwardian society had come to treat speech as a reliable, almost scientific index of origin.

Yet Shaw does not simply illustrate this principle, he satirises the prejudice it enables. Higgins's early judgement of Eliza, "*A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere, no right to live.*" (Shaw, 1913), evaluates her entirely on the sound of her voice rather than on intelligence, honesty, or moral character. The hyperbole exposes what Lippi-Green (2012) calls language ideology: the socially constructed belief systems, not linguistic fact, that assign prestige to some varieties and stigma to others, since every accent, including Eliza's Cockney, is governed by systematic phonological rules and is equally capable of expressing complex thought. Higgins's later ambition, "*I'll pass her off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party.*" (Shaw, 1913), completes the logic of this ideology

by treating pronunciation as sufficient qualification for class membership on its own, independent of education, wealth, or lineage. This is exactly the assumption that recent accent bias research continues to document in employment and professional contexts, where speakers with prestigious accents are judged more competent and trustworthy than equally qualified speakers with regional or working class accents (Donnelly et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022), and where accent has been shown to remain a remarkably stable marker of perceived status across successive generations of listeners (Sharma et al., 2022).

The historical setting of the play sharpens this pattern further. In Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Received Pronunciation was increasingly associated with education, authority, and the upper class, while regional and working class accents carried negative stereotypes reinforced by schooling, employment practice, and polite society alike (Donnelly et al., 2019). Shaw's decision to make a phonetics professor, rather than a banker or an aristocrat, the agent of Eliza's transformation is therefore not incidental: it dramatises the historically specific belief that speech itself, understood almost as a technical property that could be engineered, was the primary gatekeeping mechanism of Edwardian class society. Read together, these textual moments answer the first research question directly: Shaw dramatises accent as the earliest and most consequential marker of class distinction in the play, one that determines how a character is perceived before ability or character can be judged, while simultaneously using satire, most sharply in Higgins's exaggerated condemnation of Eliza's voice, to expose the arbitrariness and cruelty of that judgement.

3.2. Idiolectal Shift, Linguistic Capital, and the Limits of Social Mobility

The second research question concerns whether these linguistic changes help or hinder Eliza's social mobility. Higgins's declared aim, "*I'll make a duchess of this draggled tailed guttersnipe.*" (Shaw, 1913), frames the experiment as more than a phonetics lesson: it targets Eliza's entire idiolect, including vocabulary, conversational etiquette, and self presentation, not pronunciation alone (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016). Over the course of her training, Eliza does not merely eliminate the phonetic features of her Cockney accent, she also acquires new vocabulary, more elaborate sentence structure, and the conversational composure expected in formal social settings. This distinction between phonetic change and idiolectal shift is analytically important, because it shows Shaw representing linguistic transformation as a comprehensive reconstruction of social identity rather than a cosmetic correction of vowels, and it explains why the transformation eventually unsettles Eliza's sense of who she is rather than simply improving her circumstances.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital clarifies why this transformation succeeds, at least on its own terms, in the ambassador's garden party scene. Because prestigious pronunciation is

recognised as legitimate by dominant social groups, Eliza's mastery of it functions as symbolic capital that she exchanges for provisional acceptance into elite society. No one at the party questions her origins, because her speech satisfies the linguistic norms that the field values (Bourdieu, 1991). This is the clearest evidence in the play that phonetic change and idiolectal shift can enable upward mobility: Eliza's new idiolect grants her access to spaces her Cockney speech would have foreclosed, and it demonstrates empirically, within the fiction of the play, that individuals who acquire the linguistic forms recognised by a dominant group are more readily accepted within it, exactly as Bourdieu's theory predicts.

However, Shaw immediately withholds a triumphant reading of that success. After the experiment, Eliza's distress is unambiguous: "*What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?*" (Shaw, 1913). This outburst marks the moment the play's central conflict shifts from linguistic to existential. Eliza has acquired the speech of a lady but not the economic independence, family standing, or recognised social role that would make that speech socially load-bearing. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, linguistic capital alone cannot substitute for the economic and social capital that dominant groups also possess, so her transformation opens a door without securing the room behind it, she can pass as upper class in conversation, but she has no inherited income, no family name, and no institutional position to sustain that appearance once the performance ends.

This limitation is reinforced at the level of characterisation. Shaw is careful to show that Eliza's determination and intelligence existed before Higgins ever met her, her willingness to pay for lessons, endure ridicule, and practise relentlessly demonstrates a capacity for self improvement that has nothing to do with her accent. What changes across the play is therefore not her inherent worth but society's willingness to recognise it once her vowels conform to prestige norms (Eagleton, 2002). That irony is the Marxist core of the play's critique: a class system that claims to reward character in fact rewards a linguistic performance, and collapses the moment that performance is convincingly imitated, since the same guests who would have dismissed Eliza as a guttersnipe now treat her as an aristocrat purely because her speech has changed. Contemporary sociolinguistic research on accent bias in hiring and professional evaluation shows an almost identical pattern operating outside fiction, where speakers with prestigious accents continue to be judged more competent, more employable, and more trustworthy than equally qualified speakers with regional or working class accents (Donnelly et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022), and where such bias has been shown to persist across the life course of listeners rather than fading with a single generational change in attitude (Sharma et al., 2022). This continuity is consistent with Shaw's suggestion that the phenomenon he dramatised in 1913 has not been resolved by a mere change in fashion or vocabulary.

A further dimension of the second research question concerns Eliza's own agency once her

idiolectal shift is complete. Rather than remaining a passive object of Higgins's experiment, Eliza increasingly uses her new linguistic confidence to challenge his authority and to demand recognition as an independent individual rather than a successful phonetics project. Her insistence on defining her own future, even without a resolved answer to where that future lies, signals that idiolectal shift has changed not only how she is perceived externally but also how she understands and asserts herself internally (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016). This suggests that linguistic capital, even where it cannot secure full structural mobility, can still enable a form of personal empowerment distinct from social acceptance, complicating any reading of the play as a simple story of either successful or failed mobility.

Taken together, the answer to the second research question is two sided. Phonetic change and idiolectal shift do function as linguistic capital that expands Eliza's opportunities and her confidence to assert herself, including her eventual willingness to challenge Higgins's authority and to question the terms of the experiment itself. But Shaw declines to present this as a complete or stable achievement: lasting social acceptance depends on economic and social capital that speech training cannot supply, so language facilitates mobility without guaranteeing it. *Pygmalion* thereby dramatises social mobility as a multidimensional process, in which linguistic capital is necessary but not sufficient, and in which structural class barriers persist even after the phonetic and idiolectal markers of class have been thoroughly and convincingly erased.

4. CONCLUSION

This study applied sociophonetic theory together with sociological, Marxist, and Bourdieusian (linguistic capital) frameworks to examine how phonetic change and idiolectal shift function as determinants of social mobility in *Pygmalion*. Using this integrated method, the analysis shows that Shaw encodes accent as the earliest marker of class distinction: Eliza's Cockney pronunciation signals her working class status before her intelligence or character can be assessed, while Higgins's ability to place speakers by sound dramatises the principle that pronunciation is systematically, not randomly, tied to social origin. Reading this pattern through Marxist and ideological critique further reveals that Shaw exposes accent based judgement as ideology rather than linguistic fact, anchoring it in the historically specific prestige of Received Pronunciation in Edwardian Britain. Applying Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital to Eliza's transformation in pronunciation, vocabulary, etiquette, and self presentation, the study finds that this capital secures her provisional acceptance into upper class society at the ambassador's garden party, yet proves insufficient on its own: her post-experiment distress reveals the absence of economic independence, family standing, or a recognised social role that would make her new speech durable, even as it enables her to assert agency against Higgins.

By combining sociophonetic analysis with literary and social criticism, this integrated method

demonstrates that phonetic and idiolectal shift operate simultaneously as linguistic processes and social mechanisms of class mobility, rather than as a static symbolic backdrop to the plot confirming that Shaw represents social mobility as multidimensional, where language is a powerful but partial resource that opens access and empowerment while leaving structural inequalities of class, wealth, and lineage intact. Extending this framework to contemporary evidence, the study further shows that accent bias in hiring, teaching, and professional evaluation still follows patterns strikingly similar to those Shaw critiqued over a century ago, indicating the method's continued explanatory relevance, future research may extend this integrated framework comparatively to other literary or sociolinguistic contexts, testing whether the partial, unstable mobility Shaw ascribes to Eliza still characterises accent-based social mobility today.

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