

# PYGMALION: A STUDY OF SOCIO-SEMANTICS

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the novel *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw (1957) which depicts Eliza, a flower girl from East London, who became the subject of an “experiment” by a Professor of Phonetics who vowed to change the way she spoke. The story is an excellent example of a very real and contextual portrait of how language, particularly socio-semantics, play a role in the achievement of communicative competence.

**Key words:** communicative competence, socio-semantics, speech community

*“You have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her!”*

(Professor Higgins)

Such were the words of the Professor of Phonetics who vowed to change Eliza Doolittle from a common flower-girl into a lady.

Language, according to Cooper (1973) is “the most complex and sophisticated of our possessions” and we, as *homo loquens*, are always interested in studying language. Language has always been regarded as a tool for communication, and learning a language means learning how to communicate appropriately. However, not everyone agrees on what it means to communicate “appropriately”. Dell Hymes (1971) created the term Communicative Competence to

refer to this ability in which speakers should be able to communicate with regard to the topic, the interlocutor, and the setting. Halliday (1978, 1985) describes the notion further by emphasizing on the three concepts of Field (topic/subject matter), Tenor (the speakers), and Mode (the channel of communication). It is logical to assume that these concepts are quite difficult for foreign language learners to master, but in fact they are as hard for first language learners/native speakers as well. This paper attempts to describe, through the illustration of Eliza Doolittle, the flower-girl in the novel *Pygmalion* by Bernard Shaw, how communication, in the form of speech, is not always an easy skill to acquire.

## **THE PROBLEM OF SPEECH**

Halliday (1974) introduces the concept of man as a social being, and in the process of becoming a social being a child has to acquire language, which plays a central role. According to Halliday, language cannot but exist in society, and any study about language must be done in the context of situation. In line with that, Bernstein (1970) created the terms linguistic codes and speech codes, and Gumperz (1968) created the concept of speech community. Both refer to language as existing within certain contexts, and to be able to communicate appropriately one has to learn certain “rules” which operate within that context, which, it may be added, may differ from one context to another.

In the case of first language learner, many would imagine that the complexities of learning to communicate appropriately are not faced by the learner, as he has learned, or acquired, the skill since childhood. Here the concepts of linguistic codes and speech codes come into play. According to Bernstein (1970) language consists of linguistic codes, or rule system, and in speech the speech codes must conform to the rules. Furthermore, different speech forms or codes “symbolize the form of the social relationships”. To him, speech form is a quality of a social structure, and that brings the discussion to a social issue. Language is undoubtedly related to social matters, and one of the most significant matters is the social class. Language, in this case speech, is the direct manifestation of the social class of the speaker. One of the distinguishing factors among the social classes is the different distribution of linguistic knowledge. Tied to this concept is Bernstein’s classification of two orders of meaning, i.e. the universalistic and the particularistic order of meaning. The former refers to

the meaning in which “principles and operations are made linguistically explicit”, whereas in the particularistic order the principles and operations are linguistically implicit. In relation to the two orders of meanings, Bernstein introduces his concepts of restricted and elaborated speech variants. With the existence of the distribution of linguistic knowledge to different social classes, the lower class has limited access to the elaborated speech variant; in other words, they only have the restricted variant at their disposal. The universalistic order of meaning is related to the elaborated speech variant, whereas the particularistic order of meaning is related to the restricted speech variant.

Any discussion on language and society will not be complete without referring to Gumperz’ concept of speech community. In his seminal work, *The Speech Community* (1968), Gumperz elaborated the term to mean “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use”. Put more simply by Trudgill (1992), a speech community is a community of speakers who share the same verbal repertoire and who also share the same norms for language use.

A speech community can be a group of people in an area, such as a village or a certain part of a town/city. These people mostly speak the same way in terms of pronunciation, grammar, and diction (vocabulary). The speech varieties that these people use form a system since they conform to the same set of social norms and values. In a speech community the speech variants are mirrors of social facts, and the relationship among the variants can be studied in two ways: dialectal and superposed. In dialectal relationship, the speech of local groups is distinguished from that of the other groups within the same broader culture. Superposed relationships, on the other hand, are those where differences refer to distinctions between “different types of activities carried out within the same group”, for example religious sermons, technical discussions.

Discussions on dialect have been going on since as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whitney, back in 1875, defined dialect as “local and personal peculiarities of pronunciation and phraseology”, and he further stated that every class has its dialectic differences. He maintained that there are dialects of different occupations and of levels of education. In his view, “the highly cultivated” (to refer to the educated) have a diction which is outside the uncultivated comprehension, whereas the uncultivated have so many inaccuracies, and “offences against correctness of speech” (ungrammatical forms, mispronunciation, slang

words, vulgarities, and the like). Clearly, Whitney had a problem with certain dialects; he then stated that language kept on changing, and those who do not conform to the speech of the best speakers have to be ranked in a lower class.

Labov (1966) in his very interesting study of the speech of New Yorkers in the USA found out that urban dialects have a new perspective; dialects can no longer be defined as the homogeneous speech of the people who live in one locality. In big cities such as London, not everybody speaks alike. Thus, besides geographical variation, urban dialects also cover speech variations which distinguish one social class from another (Halliday, 1974).

### **PYGMALION: A CASE IN POINT**

As stated above, Whitney (1875) sees the lower class dialect as having ungrammatical forms, and incorrect pronunciation. This instance is very clearly depicted in the speech of Eliza Doolittle, the flower-girl in the novel *Pygmalion*. This novel by Bernard Shaw (1957) is especially interesting for language teachers because of its contents. Not only does the novel have an interesting plot and conflicts, it is also a kind of Phonetics lesson disguised in a story.

Eliza Doolittle is a poor flower-girl from Drury Lane, East London. She speaks Cockney, one of the “less-respected” dialects of London. For instance, when a young man collides with her in his haste to look for a taxi she says, “Nah, then, Freddy, look wh’ y’ gowin, deah”. Upon hearing her speech, Professor Higgins, a professor of Phonetics, who happens to be standing next to her in Covent Garden waiting for the rain to stop, vows that in six months he will make Eliza speak beautifully, she can even pass as a lady and attend the King’s garden party at The Buckingham Palace. Eliza, of course, is very excited at the prospect, and she is even willing to pay the Professor for the tuition. After all, as Labov (1966) states, women are generally more aware of their speech and want to be acknowledged in the higher class than the one they actually come from.

Professor Higgins and his colleague, Colonel Pickering, then starts working on Eliza’s speech and manners, from the way she has to use a handkerchief to wipe her eyes, to the grammar she has to use in talking. As Higgins himself predicts, the difficulties will be “to get her to talk grammar”, to which Eliza responds, “I don’t want to talk grammar. I want to talk like a lady in a flower-shop”. The first lesson is for her to say her alphabet. Amidst her protests, she

has to say A-B-C-D, etc, which she pronounces as “Ahyee, Bəyee, Cə-yee”, and to which Higgins roars and corrects her relentlessly. When asked to say “a cup of tea” she says “a cappətə-ee”. After a few months comes the first test for Eliza when Higgins wants her to come to his mother’s “at home”. It turns out to be a great success at the beginning, since she still remembers Higgins’ warnings to limit her speech topics to the weather and everybody’s health. However, soon she forgets the limits and embarks on a prolonged speech about her aunt’s death, and she returns to her old style of speech. Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering are perplexed, of course, and they give hints that Eliza should go. Ironically, Clara Eysnford Hill, another guest at the at-home, finds Eliza’s speech very amusing and she is sure that it is the latest trend in ‘small-talk’ among the cultivated.

After six months, Eliza has to meet her final test that is to go to a grand reception at one Embassy in London. Wearing very luxurious attire and accessories, she presents herself very well, and she becomes the attention of everybody there. She speaks in such a cultivated manner that other guests are very sure that she is not an English lady because “she speaks English too perfectly”. Even Nepommuck, a Hungarian man who was once a student of Professor Higgins’, is convinced that she is a Hungarian Princess. When asked about his conviction, he asks the hostess, “Can you show me any English woman who speaks English as it should be spoken?” He further states that “Only foreigners who have been taught to speak it speak it well”. This remark mirrors Shaw’s own view that the English “have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it”, and “If everyone in England learned to speak ‘good English’, there would be much less friction in society...”

The scenes above clearly illustrate the existence of speech communities. Eliza originally belongs to the speech community of Drury Lane, which is similar to that of Lisson Grove, where she comes from; and to the norms and speech codes of Cockney which is considered uncultivated/uneducated. After six months she is then ‘converted’ to the speech community of the educated Londoners with the norms and speech codes of the ‘elites’. However, Eliza is not very happy about her achievements since after the reception she feels that she belongs nowhere. She wants to be regarded as an English lady, and yet the guests regard her as a foreigner. She cannot return to her old neighbourhood, and she cannot stay in Wimpole Street with the Professor. Clearly, speech communities form boundaries which are not so easy to cross. A person from

one speech community will not find it comfortable to switch to another community, even though s/he has a strong motivation for doing so.

The case of Eliza is also a good starting point to talk about the concept of register, and with that, semantic. Eliza, who belongs to two speech communities, may be said to own two different registers as well. Halliday (1978: 35) gives a clear explanation by means of a table about the two terms: dialect and register. Below is the table:

**Table 1. Varieties in Language**

	<b>Dialect</b>	<b>Register</b>
<b>Definition</b>	What you speak (habitually)	What you are speaking (at the time)
<b>Definer</b>	Who you are (socio-region of origin and or adoption)	What are you are doing (nature of social activity being engaged in)
<b>Expression</b>	Expressing diversity of social structure (pattern of social hierarchy)	Expressing diversity of social process (social division of labor)
<b>Principle Definition</b>	Different ways of saying the same thing and tend to differ in: phonetics, phonology, lexicogrammar, and sometimes phonology (but not in semantic)	Ways of saying different things and tend to differ in: semantics (and hence in lexicogrammar, as realization of this)
<b>Extreme Cases</b>	Antilanguages, mother-in-law languages	Restricted languages, languages for special purposes
<b>Typical Instances</b>	Subcultural varieties (standard/non-standard)	Occupational varieties
<b>Principal Controlling Variables</b>	Social class, caste; provenance (urban/rural); generation; age; sex	Field (type of social action), tenor (role-relationship); mode (symbolic organization)
<b>Characterized by</b>	Strongly-held attitudes towards dialects as symbol of social diversity	Major distinction of spoken/written; language in action/language in reflection

By studying the table we can picture Eliza, who originally belongs to a certain speech community with a certain dialect, after the six-month training with Professor Higgins is transferred to another speech community (that of the educated elite) with the refined dialect. Further, in her ultimate test in the grand reception at the Embassy, she is forced to use a certain register, i.e. that which will disguise her origin and thus serves to place her as a Princess from Hungary (against her true wish).

The true test, both for Eliza and Professor Higgins (who places a bet with Colonel Pickering that nobody will find out the true identity of Eliza), is whether Eliza can perform well in the company of the educated Londoners. Here Eliza is tested in terms of her transformation to “a lady”, and Professor Higgins is tested in terms of his success in teaching Eliza and transforming her into a lady who talks grammar and pronounces every word correctly. Seen from the occasion we can see that there is an issue of semantic system at play here. As Halliday (1978) states, every speaker has at his disposal some choices of meaning potentials, and in social interaction the speaker actualizes his selection of meaning potentials in the form of text. Meaning here is expressed as sound (pronunciation) and grammar. This concept is the elaboration of his earlier statement (Halliday, 1974) in which he holds that the language of the adult is “a set of socially contextualized resources of behavior, a meaning potential that is related to situations of use”. Furthermore he states that being appropriate is essential in the ability to mean. In this discussion on meaning potential we can refer to the concept of socio-semantic, which means “the study of meaning in a social or sociological framework” (Halliday, 1974:36). In Eliza’s speech after she is taught by Professor Higgins we can see that she continually makes selections in her meaning potentials so as to make the desired effects and the intended meaning in the hearers. That she is successful can be seen from the reaction of the other guests. Even Nepommuck, Higgins’ former student, who has become an interpreter, and who boasts that he now has Higgins’ talent of placing anyone in Europe, is convinced that Eliza is a Princess from Hungary. In the social framework of the socio-semantic, we can say that the setting in which Eliza performs her speech demands her to use that particular register, in that particular setting.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Eliza Doolittle in the novel *Pygmalion* is a study of Linguistics. It is commonly regarded as a study of Phonetics, but I prefer to see it as more than that. Besides studying how we should pronounce English words, we can also learn culture and social systems prevailing in England, particularly in London. In addition, and this is the focus of this paper, we can learn about language which is so closely linked to the social context and situation where it is spoken, and about the system of meaning and meaning potentials of the speakers. *Pygmalion*, as Bernard Shaw's masterpiece, is not merely a novel. It is a book on culture, language and linguistics, and in particular sociolinguistics and semantics. And to return to my initial comment at the beginning of this paper, the story of Eliza has shown us that the skill of communicating (speaking) appropriately may pose difficulties not only for foreign language learners but also for first language learners. The manner which we employ to put across the meaning we intend to deliver is something that should be learned by all speakers of the language, native and non-native.

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