

# A Study of Linguistic Behavior from the Perspective of Sociolinguistic—Taking *My Fair Lady* as an Example

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## **Abstract**

*People's social background is closely related to people's language behavior, and even people who use the same language will have many differences because of their social backgrounds. The movie "My Fair Lady" gives you a visual enjoyment. And this paper analyzes the film from the perspective of sociolinguistics. The language act presented in this film fully illustrates the relationship between language and social class, gender, and geographical factors, which explains the influence of people's language behavior on their social status and gender, and also shows the influence of these factors on people's language behavior.*

## **Keywords**

*Sociolinguistic, language behavior, social factors*

## **1. Introduction**

The origin of language is closely related to the origins of human society. Language is a social phenomenon, everything in human social life, all or at least is partially reflected in the language. More precisely, everything in a particular society of a particular time and space is exactly reflected in the language used by the society, that is, the language reflects all the phenomena and all the activities of society (Ruan, 2002).

In this paper, the authors take the classic film *My Fair Lady* as the research object, the authors analyze the application and expression of sociolinguistics in social life, which help to further explore the film behind the language of the characters and psychological meaning. In 1964, Audrey Hepburn starred in the classic Hollywood movie *My Fair Lady* showed in the United States. The film tells the story of a

humble, behaviorally vulgar flower girl Eliza, who are in a chance to know the famous linguist Professor Higgins, and in his language training, the girl became into a manners elegant, graceful ladies, and had a pure English which approved by the upper class of London society, which ranks among the upper class, completed a change that from a flower girl to a noble aristocratic. Professor Higgins led Eliza to attend the queen's high-level dance to test Eliza's language clearance, unexpectedly, not only Eliza's looks get everyone's attention, but the language is deceived the Queen's experts, and she is considered as a pure Hungarian princess. However, when she reached this desire, but found it difficult to return to the original place, because her elegant manners and noble language is not suitable for doing humble work, but she can choose a higher status work which can receive people respect, such as the voice teacher work. Thus, the language in the actress's life had a crucial role. It can not only directly reflect the language of the user's social background, and even can determine the language of the user's social class, change the language of the user's social status (Xiao, 2014).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *The Study of Linguistic Behavior of Sociolinguistic Aboard and at Home*

In 1952, the American linguist Haver C. Currie first proposed the concept of sociolinguistics. But sociolinguistics became an independent discipline in the 1960s. American linguists William Labov and D. H. Hermes were the representatives of the time. Hudson argues that sociolinguistics is a discipline that links the language of social studies. According to this concept, the interaction between language and society is the focus of social linguistics, which combines the different disciplines of theoretical methods (sociology, linguistics), with a different perspective on the use of language embodied social characteristics. Its purpose is to better understand the language structure and language in the communication how to exercise their function. In Hudson's view, a person's language has a lot to do with his or her social background, and his or her experience is largely determined by the language spoken by him or her (Hudson, 2000). Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between society and language disciplines, which includes two aspects, namely language and society. These two aspects influences with each other. Hu (2007) believes that society is in language, as people in the mirror, society can reflect the social situation through language; society is the source of language, social development promotes the development of language, language expression reflects all aspects of society. Different social settings, social background determines the use of different languages, at the same time, personal use of the language also reflects the people's social class, social background, education, occupation and identity.

And for example, many scholars from aboard and at home make research on language and gender in the early years. According to Chen (2013), she said that as early as the 17th century, Robin Fort introduced the American Indian language of the Caribbean, in which the language used by men and women made European colonists mistaken for two different language phenomena. The study of gender language in the Western women's liberation movement, which began in the 1960s, is a huge push, and

scholars have begun to apply the research methods and achievements of various disciplines of linguistics and social science to the study of gender language. And gender language also make Chinese scholars did some researches, in the 1980s, the true sense of gender language research was carried out. The first book on the study of language and gender relations is Sun Rujian's *Language and Gender*, which studies the gender differences in Chinese from the perspective of sociolinguistics (Chen, 2013).

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Purpose and Significance of Study

Society has a guiding role to the development of language, Hu thinks that society in the language, as people in the mirror, the community can reflect the social situation through the language (Zhang, 2016). Society is the source of language, social development is in order to promote language development, and language express all aspects of the response to society. Different social settings, social background determines people use different languages, the same, the different use of language by people also reflects the people's social background, social class, identity, occupation and education.

The authors want to illustrate the relationship between people's language behavior and some social factors, especially on social status, region and gender, and hope that people can further understand the role of language in society. Authors take the famous film "My Fair Lady" as an example, and analyze the exactly sentence which different people said from this movie. And this makes people not only pay more attention on the influence on social factors which reflected by different language behavior, but the social factors also make influence on people's language behavior. Also certificated that people's different language behaviors has relationship with social factors, such as region, gender, social status, even some geographical factors. Just as the social linguist Lakoff said that, the speaker's language can reflect all aspects of his social attributes, which is called the theory of identity by him (Zhang, 2016).

### 4. Findings and Discussion

Linguists have proved that there is no reason in linguistics to show that one language is superior to another language through a large number of studies in many languages around the world. All languages are the same "good" and have complex systems. To meet the needs of the speaker communication, and with the needs of people to change (Wang, 1992). But different societies have different developing levels, so the language is influenced by different social factors, such as region, social status and gender.

#### 4.1 Language and Region

No matter what kind of language are all affected by the geographical to form into different language variants. Even the people living in the same country and even the same city, the language used is also very different. That is called the *Sociolect*. It is the same region of social members because of the difference of their occupation, class, age, gender, cultural education and other aspects and to form into different social variants. The difference in accent reflected by geographical differences in linguistics should be the most intuitive form of our observation of language. We usually regard this difference as a

dialect. Regional dialects can distinguish people from different regions. Geographical dialects are words used by different geographical areas. The same language is different due to geographical differences in voice, intonation, vocabulary and so on. In London there are also “ten different tone” language phenomenon. In the film *My Fair Lady*, the linguist Higgins lived in the urban area of London, while the heroine Eliza lived in the remote slums, it is in the south of London. These two places are subject to economic, political and other conditions, although not far apart, the language is different.

The linguist Higgins and Eliza are from different regions, the most significant differences in language is reflected in the voice. The professor speaks about standard English, and Eliza speaks English with a strong dialect. She pronounces the vowel “[a][e][i][o][u]” into “Ahyee ‘ e ‘ iyee ‘ ow ‘ you”. The reason is that Eliza grew up in the slums. This kind of geographical environment brings not only the differences between the upper social class and lower social class in culture and the concept, but also the language differences. It is easy to see living in the same city or country in different parts of the pronunciation also has a wide variety, so there is a large number of different pronunciation of the dialects of different ways. For example, Professor’s friend Pickering mentioned: “In India, there is no less than 147 kinds of dialect recorded”. Of course, we can also according to a person’s dialect to infer where he came from. Higgins said that, “Anyone can spot an Irishman or a York shire-man by his brogue but I can place a man within six miles. I can place within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets” (*My Fair Lady*, 1964).

In the messenger’s dance party, Professor Higgins met his former student, Kappa, a linguist who was proficient in 32 languages. He said he knew everyone in Europe, and the implication was that he could according to the voice, intonation or vocabulary and other language features to determine what kind of social background, from which place. This also reflects the inseparable relationship between language and geography.

There are many ways of pronunciation in the same language. People in different regions have their own way of pronunciation. We can infer that a person’s area depends on a person’s dialect. This also reflects the influence of geographical dialects on language use.

#### 4.2 Language and Social Status

The social class has a direct influence on the use of language. Two people born in the same place, said the same dialect may have different expression because the impact of social background. Their social backgrounds tend to intentionally or unintentionally affect their language choices. At the same time, their respective language features can also reflect the difference in their identity. Generally speaking, the social class is different, its language groups are different. The language used in the upper classes of society is closer to the proper language, and the informal components in the language used in the middle and lower layers of society are more. Social dialects can distinguish different classes or people of different groups, the social context has an important effect on people’s speech and has a great influence on language use. In other words, people in the upper classes and lower classes may be

completely different. Those groups that are less likely to receive school education tend to use informal languages, while higher-educated groups tend to be standard. And we can easily find that, there are significant differences in language use from different regions, ethnic groups, people with different economic incomes and educational conditions. Labov's social variation's study is a more prominent study of this study, which suggests that there is a significant correlation between language and speaker identity (e.g., the social class) (Labov, 1973). Ordinary people often can according a person's speaking to judge his or her place of birth, education level, education level and social status and other social and cultural content. A person's language has an instructive role as a social class, like his or her dress and other extrinsic content. In the terminology of sociolinguistics, the same language has different variants, and different variants are associated with different discourse societies.

Language is a form of social practice, it symbolizes the high and low caste people. In the UK, the upper class is more commonly used in standard English, which represents the interests and powers of the upper classes. Professor Higgins is aware of the close relationship between language and social status. He said, an English way of speaking English can be separated from his level. If the pronunciation is not good, he will have a lot of people despise him. He believes that people can according a person's speaking to distinguish his origin, social status, so he plans to transform Eliza's way of speech and behavior, in order to improve her social status. In the film, the upper class people speak standard English and the lower people speak non-standard English. Therefore, the upper class belongs to the high-level speech group, then the community of language variants have been respected, on the contrary, the lower class belongs to the low-level language community, the community language variant is vulgar. In life, human origin, social status is distinguish by a person's speaking way.

When professor Higgins first talked to Eliza, in the eyes of a highly educated professor of high society, Eliza's humble language is like a pigeon, which is simply unworthy to live in society. The reason why she lives in slums is due to her nasty language. And when professor Higgins with Eliza to participate in the mother's Happy Valley in which test the language of Eliza, when Eliza said "Done her in", which does not meet the language of high language standards, the other several ladies are shocked, and realized that Eliza was not belong to upper class. So it obviously show that language and social status has a intimate relationship.

Eliza lived on her life by selling flowers, and the English what she said was not authentic. Without training, she read "ing" into "in", for example, "I ain't done nothin' wrong by speakin' to the gentleman". And she read "pay" as "py". Also she read /ai / for /ei /, for example, "The rain /rain/ in Spain /spain/ stays /stais/ mainly /mainli/ in the plain /plain /" (*My Fair Lady*, 1964). And there are many similar cases, all of these are pronunciation aspects. Second, in language expression, her excessive use of slang makes his English more authentic, she would say "I is not done", "me words", "in me life" and many expressions which do not meet the grammatical expression of the sentence. Well-educated Higgins often use complex and varied sentences, and Eliza will only use fragmented short sentences. Also Eliza uses more interjection, such as Ah-ow-oo-oooh, oh, Garn, Nah-ow, Ugh.

These interjection in the language can be very vivid to reflect the strong feelings of the speaker, but in the social environment, people on the “ladies” behavior requirements are dignified and elegant. Such interjection not only reflects speakers’ emotions, but also reflects the speaker who used to shouting, which was opposite to the requirement of the “lady” image by the community at that time. Third, in intonation aspect, Eliza’s accent is not clear or erroneously accented. For example, when Eliza is saying “How kind of you to”, her voice is exaggerated and roaring, such as at the beginning of the movie when someone tells her that someone is recording her words, she starts to clamor. When Higgins’ maid was prepared to bathe her, she was so loud that her reflection reflected her vulgar behavior as a lower class. And Eliza accent is inappropriate to use, often the use of stress when not used, and should not reread the word is reread.

And there is a phenomenon called hypercorrection. In London, upper class people always pronounce “H” in words. But for people who live in lower social status, like Eliza, their pronouncing character is H-less. So before Eliza was trained by professor Higgins, she had difficulty to pronounce “H”, but after she was trained for a long time, in order to let herself more likely as a upper class lady, she used more h- pronunciation than upper class people. Even in some words there are not h- pronunciation, she still pronounce it as h- pronunciation. For example, anxiety into Hanxiety; exile into Hexile; anguish into Hanguish.

The position of the different language variants is equal in linguistic sense, and we can not say that some variants are more advanced or more graceful than others, and that different language variations are perfectly able to express the content of the expression what we expect . However, the judgment of different ways of speaking is often social, and is related to discourse societies belonging to the language variant. If the discourse community belongs to the senior, it is considered that the language variant is also respected and prestigious. On the other hand, that the language variant is low and vulgar.

#### *4.3 Language and Gender*

Language not only reflects the social class differences, but also reflects the male and female differences in using language. Even those who belong to a class, their language will be due to gender differences with the characteristics of this. That is to say, men and women show some differences in language use. As we all know, there are many different between men and women in the use of language, such as tone, vocabulary, the choice of topics. Many scholars have noticed the difference between women and men in the way of speaking. Such as linguists Penelope Eckert and Sally Mccomell-Ginet (2003) make a comprehensive study of the intrinsic link between language and gender from the physiological, psychological, social and other aspects, and analyze that the language women use represents their sense of insecurity, education, obedience, but the male language more to reflect their sense of domination, dominance and independence. We know that for different sexes, society usually has different expectations. Women tend to use standard variants when speaking, because verbal equivalence is an important aspect of female literacy. In the traditional society, the feminine virtues are basically all the characteristics. In contrast, people expect expectations for men, although there are ritual requirements,

but pay more attention to its practical ability.

First of all, the choice of topics in conversation is not the same for different sexes, so the language used is different. A woman, when her pronunciation is standard, grammar is accurate, her content can be relatively empty, but also easy to accept. But for men, the topic of communication is very broad, about current affairs politics, economic and trade and history and culture. Professor Higgins said that, "You want to talk of Keats or Milton, she only wants to talk of love; you go to see a play or ballet and she spend it searching for her glove" (*My Fair Lady*, 1964). It obviously shows the difference between the topic what man and women concerned.

Second, the different sex people using the tone is not in the same way, and also affect the the difference of language expression. At the end of the sentence, men prefer to use a low tone, while women prefer to use the rising tone. The words used by women often reflect exaggerated intonation. In the film, Eliza repeatedly use the rising tone, and more use the rhetoric, indicating that when the heroine stand in front of Higgins, a hesitant, lack of self-confidence attitude was reflected. On the contrary, Higgins' language is more crisp, and decisive, it not only shows his aversion to Eliza's vulgar manners, poor language and identity at the beginning, but also embodies himself as a linguist with high level of education allowed him to show a higher position in front of Eliza. For example, "Eliza: Well, if you was a gentleman, you might ask me to sit down, I think. Don't I tell you I'm bringing you business?" (*My Fair Lady*, 1964). Eliza using a rhetorical question shows that she doesn't have enough confidence. But for Higgins, he said that, "The streets will be strewn with the bodies of men, shooting themselves for your sake before I'm done with you" (*My Fair Lady*, 1964). This sentence shows that there is a strong self-confidence and affirmation in Higgins' tone. He believes that a vulgar flower girl will have a perfect transformation, which can greatly meet the challenges of their psychological through his language training. And in this movie, Eliza said, such as "Aha!", "Sixty pounds? What are you talking about...But I ain't got sixty pounds" (*My Fair Lady*, 1964). The exaggerated tone more vividly reflects Eliza's surprise and poverty. Men generally do not use the rising tone, always choose the low tone, and women will choose to tune up.

Third, the different sex people will choose different words to express what they want to say. Although the heroine in the film sets the rugged lower flower girl, and the hero is a high school professor of high society, the vocabulary they use is also affected by gender. In terms of vocabulary, men use more straightforward words than women. Huggins said that, "By right she should be taken out and hung for the cold-blooded murder of the English Tongue" (*My Fair Lady*, 1964). Such language is fully expressed as a male, Higgins express his emotion without disguising their dislike and contempt for Eliza voice. The heroine is more inclined to use adjectives, despite her vulgar behavior, but using polite euphemism, after her training transformation, the language she uses is more elegant and subtle. Eliza used "lovely" many times to express a longing for a better life in the future, sometimes when she expresses anger and resistance, she only uses "aow" or "garn" to express dissatisfaction. As a woman, Eliza's language often appears with emphasis on the words and repeated phenomenon. For example,

“You are no gentleman, you are not to talk such things. I am a good girl. I am” (*My Fair Lady*, 1964).

From the above analysis can be seen, male and female differences in speech communication is reflected in the voice of the tone, vocabulary, topics choices. In general, women tend to use standard language variants than men, with more intonation and more vocabulary. In the traditional society, women can only be elegant and beautiful. However, it is the opposite of the male body, if a man only focus on the instrument on the dress, then he once communicated with others, others can immediately know his social status, education or occupation background.

## 5. Conclusion

The role of language in today’s social life is becoming more and more important, it is the bridge of human communication. Because of the existence of language, human beings can continue to learn and communicate in this way, and the society was able to make progress and develop. Of course, the development of language is restricted by various social factors and constraints in different degrees.

Sociolinguistics is a discipline that studies the relationship between society and language. If the clothing is a person’s physical modification, then the language is the external value of the comprehensive embodiment of people. *My Fair Lady* can not only make people enjoy the wonderful plots, but also make us realize that a person’s social language behavior play an important role in reflecting his social status, region and gender and even in determining one person’s fate. Language and society are inextricably linked. Language symbolizes the society, and it has a social function, it not only convey the text content, but also load the social information. And the different forms of using language also represents a different social form. Language is the carrier of social communication, which embodies the distinction of human social hierarchy. In different social forms, the language used in the form is not the same. The language used by a person often reflects the social status of the person, social background, region, gender and other social information, and these social information is not only a social factor that leads to language variation but also plays a guiding role in the application of language in interpersonal communication. In the study of individual language, we should consider the language of the user’s gender differences, the level of social class, the geographical distribution of the impact. Different language behavior will have an impact on human society, the diversification of language behavior is to promote the diversification of social phenomena. Also the language should not be regarded as just a tool, but should be a quality.

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