Journal of English Language, Literature and Education
Vol. 6 Issue 3 (July-September 2024) PP. 34-45

ISSN: 2710-4923 (Online)
ISSN: 2663-3485 (Print)

Critical Exploration of Eliza's Use of Restricted Code and Elaborated Code in *Pygmalion*

[1]*Maira Sethi*

Abstract

This research paper explored the character of Eliza Doolittle in Pygmalion and its movie adaptation, My Fair Lady, through the use of Restricted and Elaborated Code. These concepts examined Eliza's transformation from a common flower girl to a duchess at the hands of Henry Higgins. The research employed the qualitative method and used Restricted Code and Elaborated Code concepts presented by Basildon Bernstein in his 2003 book, Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language (Class, Codes and Control) for deductive thematic analysis. Given the context, Eliza's dialogues and the settings in the play and the movie where she delivered those dialogues were also taken into account because the relationship between social class and language could not be ignored in the society Eliza inhabits. The study also focused on her dilemmas, dreams, desires and struggles to determine the outcomes of Eliza's transformation, whether it was a blessing or a curse. By analysing Eliza's use of language and interactions, the findings offered insights into the power dynamics of language and social class in shaping individual's identity.

Keywords: *Elaborated Code, Language, Restricted Code, Transformation*

[1]*Lecturer, Department of English, Kinnaird College University, Lahore, Pakistan.*
mairasethi364@gmail.com
Doi: https://doi.org/10.54692/jelle.2024.0603226

Introduction

This study George Bernard Shaw was an exceptional English playwright. He was an exemplary literary critic and socialist who embedded major influences on theatre, politics and women's rights. His work on the comedy of manners satirised major issues of British society. Most of his plays are based on the dilemmas of appearance versus reality. This theme, along with many others, is particularly evident in his play *Pygmalion. Pygmalion* shows rigid class differences and how people at the

bottom of the social strata are exploited due to these social classes.

A particular term used for Shaw's plays is Shavian drama. One of the features of this kind of drama is that most of the play's action depends on the dialogue exchange between characters. The main characters personify the playwright's ideas. Shaw is famous for attacking the romantic notion of ideals like love and war. One perfect example is his play *Arms and the Man*, in which he talks about the futility of war. He has some characters in his plays that act as his mouthpiece. His approach to conventional topics is usually very different from the standard approach. His dramatic techniques are considerably visible through his stage equipment. In *Pygmalion*, his play entirely depends on the machinery and equipment. He reveals valuable information through these stage directions.

Pygmalion is a typical example of a Shavian play. *Pygmalion* compares two different classes and serves a didactic purpose. The upper class in this play claims it is more intelligent than the lower class, but Eliza proves this wrong by being a bright and intelligent student. Mrs. Pearce personifies Shaw's assertion that women are more sensitive to life than men. She is concerned about Eliza's well-being once Higgins' experiment is completed, although Higgins is not. Social critique is a very prominent theme in Pygmalion.

Research Objective

To critically explore Eliza's transformation through the lens of language codes, offering insights into the complex relationships between language, social class, and identity

Research Question

How is Eliza's transformation being depicted through the lens of language codes, offering insights into the complex relationships between language, social class, and identity?

Literature Review

The secondary characters in *Pygmalion* reveal essential information about the main characters. Characters like Colonel Pickering could be considered secondary main characters, as his role is central to Eliza's character development. These secondary characters start appearing at the very onset of the play. When it is raining and a lot of people are seeking shelter from the rain, the secondary characters try to comfort Eliza. Some of

them are sympathetic, some of them are not, and some of them are only there for the sake of entertainment (Shaw, 1994). Shaw describes these characters by their appearance and language, not by their names. At this point, the audience does not know who the main character is. The bystander says, "You take us for dirt under your feet, don't you? Catch you taking liberties with a gentleman" (Shaw, 1994). This, for the first time, describes Higgins' general attitude.

These secondary characters in Shaw's plays are not minor characters because they have great significance on the stage. Characters like Mrs. Pearce and Colonel Pickering know about the dangers that would come along with Eliza moving into the house. It can be said that Shaw's characters are humans; they are not perfect, although Shaw does use them for didactic purposes. Eliza does not want anyone to consider her a prostitute: "This accounts for the concern that both Pickering and Mrs. Pearce express about Eliza's status in the house: neither of them wants to be a party to immorality or crime" (Kent, 2021).

The genre of this play is never truly determined. Some people have called it a tragedy, while others have called it a comedy. It falls into Shaw's pleasant comedies category, but it is not entirely comical. It talks about serious issues like social hierarchy, but a serious undertone is always present.

Shaw's main aim was the "dissection of the status quo" (Wixson, 2020), making people question the British class system. The comedic elements in his plays often arise when characters like Eliza and Clara attempt to overcome or alter class distinctions, seeking to fit into spaces where they do not naturally belong. *Pygmalion* carries the subtitle of a romance, which led to widespread speculation that Eliza would settle for Higgins, a notion that Shaw later contradicted by adding a sequel to clarify her future.

The romantic comedy elements in Shaw's work can be paralleled in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where secondary characters like Puck and Bottom drive the comedic action. Similarly, in *Pygmalion*, the humour is often carried by characters like Alfred Doolittle, whose role in the film adaptation, *My Fair Lady*, is given significant screen time, underscoring his importance to the plot.

This intersection of class and comedy is also evident in modernist literature, particularly in exploring bodily dislocations or the sense of being out of place. Lévêque (2020) examines these dislocations in *Mrs. Dalloway*

and *Ulysses*, emphasising how the characters' movements through space reflect their attempts to navigate social hierarchies. Shaw's characters similarly traverse social boundaries, with Eliza embodying a physical and social transformation as she moves between worlds.

Moreover, Shaw's critique of the British class system can be understood through a broader ecological and modernist lens. Porter (2022) explores the Edenic symbolism in Woolf's work, focusing on how life and death intertwine within natural settings. While Shaw's *Pygmalion* is not explicitly ecological, his critique of rigid social systems and the transformation of Eliza can be likened to a disruption of the "natural" social order. As Walton (2021) discusses in the context of World War I literature, trauma and social displacement often challenge traditional narratives, similar to how Shaw challenges the romantic expectations placed on Eliza.

Finally, Lostoski-Ho (2023) explores how modernist writers like Woolf and Eliot engage with ecological concerns and human connections to the natural world. Though *Pygmalion* is centred on human relationships and social change, it shares a focus on personal and societal transformation that questions the natural order of things with modernist works. Shaw's play and its adaptation *My Fair Lady* embody this tension between human desires, social expectations, and the potential for reinvention.

So, Shaw's *Pygmalion* challenges romantic tropes by focusing on class struggle, and its film adaptation emphasises romantic comedy, aligning more with audience expectations. Like Doolittle, the humorous and secondary characters retain their importance, offering comedic relief while representing societal critique.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analysis approach to investigate Eliza's transformation in *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*, utilising Bernstein's concepts of Restricted Code and Elaborated Code as a theoretical framework as follows:

i. Contextual Consideration: An analysis of the social setting, character dynamics, and power relations in each scene to understand the interplay between language and social class.

ii. Thematic Identification: An identification and exploration of themes emerging from Eliza's transformation, including autonomy, identity, and empowerment.

iii. Textual Examination: A detailed analysis of Eliza's dialogues in the play and movie scripts to identify patterns and shifts in her language use.

iv. Comparative Examination: A comparison of Eliza's language use and transformation in the play and movie adaptations to highlight similarities and differences.

By employing the respective methodology, the study provided an original and in-depth analysis of Eliza's transformation through the lens of language codes, offering new insights into the complex relationships between language, social class, and identity.

Data Analysis

i. Contextual Consideration:

The protagonist of the play, Eliza Doolittle, belongs to the lower working class. She is an ordinary flower girl who, in the hopes of changing her social status, becomes a mere bet in the hands of Henry Higgins. This paper aims to analyse Eliza's character and her dialogues. Eliza employs two different linguistic codes during her transformation from a flower girl to a duchess both in the play and in the movie adaptation of the play. The concept of linguistic codes given by Basil Bernstein in his book *Class, Codes and Control* is primarily kept in focus.

Pygmalion makes extensive use of Karl Marx's concept of class division. Marx separated the class into two factions: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. There are disparities not only in the way various classes conduct their daily lives but also in how they communicate and express themselves. For some, one vernacular may appear more official and proper than the other. Some people, including those who read *Pygmalion*, believe Eliza's metamorphosis was essential for her to appear bright. Some, however, see her change as an unintended tragedy. Eliza was never meant to live the life of a bourgeoisie since her social standing prevents her from doing so. Learning upper-class manners makes it difficult for her to return to her usual existence. Ultimately, her desperation about what could be done to her is obvious.

Pygmalion subverts Cinderella's metamorphosis by setting the events in real life, where practical challenges may develop. In contrast, the film alters the finale to make it more of a quick fix. Eliza ends up happy with Higgins, which appears to be a simple answer to all of the troubles that arose

previously. The use of language by the play's male and female characters is also worth noting; Higgins and Pickering employ elegant language, while Eliza does not, and therefore is linked with being ignorant. If readers pay close attention, they will notice that Eliza does not lack manners; she merely behaves according to her social status. Higgins could be nicer to her, but he treats her as if she were a mere experiment, with no regard for what happens to her. Eliza's linguistic development goes beyond the individual level and reflects the social and cultural issues of the moment.

ii. Thematic Identification:

The play and movie are set in the early twentieth century, a period of significant social change for people. There was a significant increase in urbanisation, industrialisation, and social mobility, resulting in diverse social hierarchies and class divisions. Everyone appeared to be busy. Eliza's development from a working-class flower girl to a cultured lady can be interpreted as a representation of social striving and upward mobility. Her use of sophisticated code reflects her desire to rise beyond her social level and participate in mainstream culture. This change, however, emphasises the contradiction between social mobility and cultural identity as Eliza attempts to reconcile her previous and present identities. Eliza's code-switching highlights the theatrical nature of identities as well as language.

She learns to use upper-class words and mannerisms, but it takes effort and trouble. Her slips into limited code underscore the struggle between her old and new selves, emphasising the notion that language is more than just a natural part of identity; it is also a tool for societal advancement and self-expression. Language is not as simple to acquire as people think; it also involves a change in a person's personality. Marx discusses the possibility of a proletarian revolt as a result of the treatment they receive from the bourgeoisie. According to Marx and Engels (2010), every type of society is based on the conflict between oppressors and oppressed classes.

Eliza, who fights to meet her basic requirements, is portrayed in Pygmalion as oppressed in her class, while Higgins and Pickering's class is oppressive because they compete against one another in a girl's logistical transformation during their spare time. Since the culture at the time upheld a strict class system, Eliza's transition is an exception and cannot be seen as typical. Lower-class members were not allowed to join upper-class groups. According to Marx, the lower classes are patronised and denigrated by the bourgeois society. This could be demonstrated by Higgins' disdain for and

treatment of Eliza. The most effective weapon in this drama for reinforcing class disparities is probably language.

Those with a more refined accent are automatically considered upper-class. Eliza's father exemplifies the challenges of the working class. His acceptance of his situation exemplifies how capitalism limits progress and advancement in society. Throughout the play, Shaw attempts to show society's dark underbelly. According to Marx, literature either agrees with or exposes reality (Marx, 1848, p. 13). *Pygmalion*, therefore, shows twentieth-century socioeconomic inequalities. Eliza continuously tries to prove that she is a person, just like people in the upper class. She has feelings that can be wounded, and her personality should not be assessed only by her class.

Eliza's metamorphosis can be understood as the monetisation of her identity. Higgins views her as a project or item to be shaped, mirroring capitalist methods in which people are valued based on their utility or output. Eliza's transition from flower girl to lady might be viewed as an 'investment' that increases her 'market value' in society. Higgins sees Eliza as only an instrument for experimentation. He employs a human being to prove his case. This shows the upper class exploiting the lower class. The play also explores the concept of false consciousness, in which the lower class adopts the values and conventions established by the ruling class.

Eliza's early desire to speak properly and improve her standing demonstrates her adoption of upper-class values. Marx believed that the economic basis significantly impacts society's superstructure, including its culture, institutions, political power structures, roles, rituals, and state. In "Pygmalion," Eliza is subjected to upper-class ideas, such as refinement, proper speech, and etiquette. This imposition demonstrates how the ruling class dictates cultural norms and values to retain their supremacy. By the end of the play, Eliza had asserted her independence, defying Higgins and pursuing her path. This act of self-determination can be interpreted as rejecting inflexible class hierarchies and stepping towards personal and societal freedom, consistent with Marxist ideals of a classless society.

iii. Textual Examination:

As the play starts, many people take cover from the rain at St. Paul's Church. All sorts of people are present here, and this allows different social classes to mingle. Major characters in the play interact here for the first time. Eliza is trying to sell her flowers when Freddy rushes in her direction and she falls. It is important to note that her name is not introduced at the

start of the play. Instead, she is called The Flower Girl (Shaw, 1994, p. 15). Her accent is intricate; she says, "There's manners f' yer" (Shaw, 1994, p. 15). She is not someone who has no manners; instead, she is just someone whose manners comply with her social class. The play's narrative constantly compares her to the upper class, which is not necessary because both classes have different goals and preferences.

According to Bernstein, there are two types of linguistic codes: "elaborated code and restricted code" (Bernstein, 2003, p. 58). These codes deal with establishing meaning at a syntactic level. Elaborated code is usually employed in formal contexts, while restricted code is employed in informal contexts (Bernstein, 2003, p. 60). When a person uses elaborated code, it becomes difficult to predict the pattern of speech as used in a variety of lexicons. If a person uses restricted code, the speech pattern can be predicted as the vocabulary is limited. It might be claimed that Eliza employed restricted code before her transition and then elaborated code.

In a Restricted Code, the speaker and listener determine the meaning. Slang and colloquial words are part of the Restricted Code. Eliza's use of words like "Garn" (Shaw,1994, p. 19) and "Ah-Ah-Ow-Ow" (Shaw, 1994, p. 28) are examples of her code. There is no abstract reasoning here and dialogues are limited. One of the sentences she often repeats includes, "I'm a good girl, I am" (Shaw, 1994, p. 23). The codes a person uses also reflect their social background. Here, it can be seen that Eliza is someone who has not received higher education; her character is the most important thing for her, as she often implies in the play (Shaw, 1994, p. 25). Her sentences are unclear, and her English is not interpretable, further widening the gap between her and her dream of social stability.

These codes are not meant to be a measure of a person's intelligence. She often fails to justify herself due to her limited lexicon, but she proves herself as a sharp-witted person when she wins Higgins' bet. After she earns a handful of money, she wants to experience how it feels to travel in a taxi. Her pronunciation is not understandable to the driver, and she could not make it more elaborate due to her restricted code (Shaw, 1994, p. 29). The taxi scene was omitted from the movie, but its importance cannot be neglected in determining Eliza's character traits and her urge to look respectable. This scene provides depth to her character.

The play presents an in-depth description of Eliza's home. Her home is miserable, but she still has "portraits of a popular actor and a fashion plate of ladies' dresses" (Shaw, 1994, p. 30). Restricted Code also employs

nonverbal communication; the setting of Eliza's home communicates her desire for freedom, stability, respect, luxuries, and economy. It is unlucky that these details are not present in the movie adaptation because they comprise an important part of Eliza's life that is lost after her linguistic transformation.

The Restricted Code is, therefore, habitual and natural. It is highly predictable, along with the use of nonverbal communication, including gestures. "The abbreviated structures of a restricted code may be learnt informally and readily. They become well-habituated. The greater range of and selection from structural alternatives associated with an elaborated code normally requires a much longer period of formal and informal learning" (Bernstein, 2003, p. 60).

Now, looking at Eliza's Elaborated Code, it is evident that she has to learn and practice vigorously along with formal learning on how to speak standardised English. Her learning process is extremely tough and based on mere imitation. It is so tough that it eventually strips off her individuality. These codes are necessary for establishing social relationships. "Class is only one of many principles of social stratification and differentiation" (Bernstein, 2003, p. 62). Eliza initially is unable to understand Higgins as she says, "Well, why won't he speak sensibly to me?" (Shaw 38). Eliza has not yet been accustomed to Higgins' class and the language he uses. Even though Higgins is insulting Eliza, his vocabulary is rich. He knows how to phrase words effectively. His insults like "deliciously low" and "horribly dirty" (Shaw, 1994, p. 40) do not make sense to Eliza, as she thinks that Higgins is talking about physical cleanliness.

The only person on Wimpole Street who seems to understand Elisa's troubles is Mrs. Pearce. She knows that Eliza is unable to understand what is going to happen to her; therefore, Mrs. Pearce continuously asks Higgins to explain everything clearly to Eliza (Shaw, 1994, p. 46). It seems as if Mrs. Pearce is Shaw's mouthpiece for women's rights. Not to ignore the fact that Colonel Pickering is the only person who speaks respectfully to Eliza. It is through his example that Eliza learns manners and conduct.

iv. Comparative Examination:

Eliza's Restricted Code in the scene where she has to take a bath reflects how she feels when she is stripped of her individuality. In her natural accent, she feels comfortable, even though she's incapable of conveying her thoughts. Even after being taught the proper way of speaking, she is restricted by Higgins from talking only about the topics of

health and weather (Shaw, 1994, p. 71).

In the scene on Pg. 77, Eliza does achieve "pedantic correctness of pronunciation and great beauty of tone" (Shaw, 1994, p. 77), but her accent seems like a mere imitation. The only sentence she could speak was, "How do you do? As soon as she starts speaking on her own, "Why would she die of influenza? She came from Diphtheria right enough the year before...she hit the bowl off the spoon" (Shaw, 1994, p. 79), she relapses into Restricted Code because she is not able to structure her sentences properly. Bernstein says that elaborated code allows a person to use a variety of grammar combinations, but this grammar is somehow mechanical (14). This is visible in the above-mentioned scenes.

As her transformation progresses, she eventually becomes able to convey her emotions and her concerns to Higgins. While talking to Pickering, she admits that she has spoken beautifully and charmed everyone many times in her dreams. It is not new for her. It is important to note how an elaborated code changes a person's linguistic range. She still fears relapsing into the Restricted Code (Shaw, 1994, p. 95).

When Eliza finally confronts Higgins and asks him, "Do my clothes belong to me or Colonel Pickering (Shaw, 1994, p. 107) and "He might want them for the next girl you pick up to experiment on" (Shaw, 1994, p. 108), the variety of possibilities Elaborated Code provides her can be seen. In the end, Eliza understands that it was not her transformation that made her a lady. It was the mannerisms and respect she received from Pickering that truly transformed her. The main message of the play is, therefore, in these lines: "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she's treated" (Shaw, 1994, p. 127).

When Eliza meets Doolittle again at Mrs. Higgins' house, she is startled to see him and quickly relapses into her natural accent (Shaw, 1994, p. 128). The ending of the play comes with a sequel, which shows the audience that Eliza married Freddy (Shaw, 1994, p. 144). At the start, they both struggle, but she overcomes it through her hard work and determination. She respects herself now and realises the importance of freedom (Shaw, 1994, p. 156).

In the movie adaptation, the ending was changed (Cukor, 1964, 2:49:54–2:53:04). Certain scenes were omitted. Eliza talks to her father directly in the movie. Rather than meeting him at Mrs. Higgins' house, she meets him where she lives (Cukor, 1964, 2:15:23-2:53:04). She only confronts Higgins at Mrs. Pearce's house. Colonel Pickering also does not

come to Mrs. Higgins' home (Cukor, 1964, 2:35:27–2:53:04). The movie focuses on maintaining visible differences between Eliza's accent before and after her transformation and succeeds at it. The restricted and elaborated codes could be studied in detail after watching the movie. But what the movie deprives Eliza of is the result of her struggles. The play visibly lets her make decisions that reflect her values for herself (Shaw, 1994, p. 140). My Fair Lady, on the other hand, ends with Eliza forgiving Higgins and Higgins being portrayed as a typical romantic hero (Cukor, 1964, 2:49:54–2:53:04).

Conclusions

Both the movie and the play portray Eliza beautifully, capturing her transformation from a humble flower girl to a refined lady. However, the movie falls short in its omission of certain crucial scenes, most notably the ending, which was altered to depict a romantic reconciliation between Higgins and Eliza. In contrast, the play is a masterpiece, offering a more nuanced and thought-provoking conclusion. Eliza's transformation is neither a blessing nor a curse, as she astutely recognises that her newfound linguistic skills will not necessarily improve her circumstances. Instead, she asserts her independence and self-worth, ultimately saving herself from the potential pitfalls of her new status. This subtle yet powerful message resonates with audiences, making the play a timeless classic. Furthermore, the play's exploration of language, class, and identity offers a rich tapestry for theoretical and linguistic analysis, cementing its place as a seminal work in the canon of English literature.

The play's themes of empowerment, autonomy, and self-discovery resonate with contemporary audiences, making it a work of enduring relevance and significance. Eliza's journey serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of self-awareness, critical thinking, and personal agency. Through her character, Shaw masterfully critiques the social conventions and power dynamics of his time, offering a searing commentary on the limitations and possibilities of human transformation. As a result, the play remains a beloved and thought-provoking classic, continues to inspire new adaptations and interpretations, and remains an essential part of the theatrical canon.

References

Bernstein, B. B. (2003). *Class, codes and control: Theoretical studies towards a sociology of language*. Psychology Press.

Bloom, H. G. B. (2010). *Bloom's modern critical views*. Chelsea House Publications.

Cukor, G. (Director). (1964). *My Fair Lady* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Kent, B., Pygmalion, H., & House, S. (2021). *Heartbreak house and Saint John*. Great Britain.

Lévêque, V. (2020). *Dislocations of the walking body: James Joyce's Ulysses and Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway* (Doctoral dissertation, Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle-Paris III).

Lostoski-Ho, L. J. (2023). *Modernism on the edge of the Anthropocene: The ecological imagination of Forster, West, Warner, Woolf, and Eliot* (Doctoral dissertation, University of New Hampshire).

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2010). *The Communist Manifesto (1848)*. In Duke University Press eBooks (pp. 305–309). https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392583-049

Porter, M. E. (2022). "A curious pattern like a tree:" Edenic death and life in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. *Christianity & Literature, 71*(1), 1–20.

Shaw, G. B. (1994). *Pygmalion*. First Edition. Penguin Books.

Walton, S. (2021). Nature trauma: Ecology and the returning soldier in First World War English and Scottish fiction, 1918–1932. *Journal of Medical Humanities, 42*(2), 213–223. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-020-09679-y

Wixson, C. (2020). *George Bernard Shaw: A selective checklist of criticism 2000-2020*. Shaw Society Publications.