Language variation and social class: Code switching in "My Fair Lady"

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Article information	ABSTRACT
	This study aims to examine the relationship between language variation and social class through the phenomenon of code-switching in the film My Fair Lady. Language is positioned as a marker of social identity, where differences in dialect and speech patterns indicate the class stratification of the characters. The characters in this movie show linguistic differences that represent their class, such as the difference between upper-class and lower-class speech patterns. The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of code-switching in reflecting social class differences through the characters' language use. Data collection was conducted through a literature review using documentation techniques on the dialogue transcripts in the film. Furthermore, the data was analyzed qualitatively using a sociolinguistic and pragmatic approach to reveal the form and function of code-switching and the social context behind it. The results of the study show that code-switching is a linguistic strategy used by the main character to navigate and form a new social identity. Language, in this case, acts as a tool for social mobility as well as a mirror of prevailing class norms. This study contributes to sociolinguistic research, particularly in understanding the dynamics of language as a representation of symbolic power and class identity. Additionally, these findings are practically relevant in language education, especially in teaching language variation and social awareness in language use.

Introduction

Language is an important reflection of a person's identity, status, and social interactions. A linguistic phenomenon that reflects the close relationship between language and society is code-switching. This concept has various definitions, depending on the linguistic perspective used. Hymes (in Rahardi, 2001) defines code-switching as a general term for the alternation or transition between the use of two languages, several variations of one language, or even different styles of language within a variety. This definition encompasses a broad spectrum of linguistic changes.

In addition, code-switching can also be seen as a shift between functional varieties or dialects. According to Nababan (in Rahardi, 2001) code-switching includes instances where speakers switch from one functional variety to another, from one dialect to another, and so on. Suwito (1983) also reinforces this definition by stating that code-switching is the transition from

one code to another in language use, while Alwasilah (in Saddhono, 2009) refers to it as the transition from one dialect to another within a single language. Code-switching can be categorized into several types based on its triggering factors. Blom and Gumperz distinguish two main types: situational code-switching and conversational code-switching. Situational code-switching occurs in response to changes in social context or topic, such as changes in class, age, or gender (Kim, 2006). This type of code-switching reflects broader social dynamics that encourage speakers to adapt to different social roles or environments.

On the other hand, conversational code-switching involves the juxtaposition of different grammatical systems within a single conversation without any change in context (Gumperz, 1982). This form of transition is often seen as a change of language in consecutive sentences, used for pragmatic purposes such as clarifying, emphasizing, or discussing certain aspects of the conversation. Thus, while situational code-switching is driven by external factors, conversational code-switching refers more to the internal dynamics of dialogue and communication strategies.

There is also another perspective that distinguishes code-switching into situational and metaphorical. Situational code-switching is often triggered by external factors such as changes in participants or shifts in topics (Kim, 2006). In contrast, metaphorical code-switching involves changing language or dialect to emphasize a particular topic or social relationship in the conversation (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986). This metaphorical shift enriches discourse and allows speakers to navigate various social domains within a single interaction. More broadly, the phenomenon of code-switching is closely related to the field of sociolinguistics, which studies how social factors such as cultural norms, expectations, and context influence language and its use (Sa'diyah, 2019). Sociolinguistics also examines the relationship between language and its speakers, including how vocabulary, attitudes, and customs influence the language used (Atmaja, 2018). Kridalaksana (in Atmaja, 2018, p. 16) defines sociolinguistics as the science that studies the characteristics and variations of language, as well as the functional aspects of language variation within a community.

In the context of sociolinguistics, code-switching often reflects the underlying social and cultural dynamics. Speakers may switch languages or dialects to conform to social norms, adapt to cultural expectations, or respond to shifts in the conversational context. By analyzing code-switching through a sociolinguistic lens, researchers can understand how language adaptation helps individuals negotiate social identities, manage relationships, and navigate the complexities of diverse communicative environments.

Studies on the relationship between language, society, and code-switching have been extensively conducted, particularly in the analysis of the film "My Fair Lady." Previous studies, such as those by Jiao Dan & Li Ru (2017) have analyzed general linguistic behavior in the film, highlighting how social background influences language use and creates differences among speakers of the same language. Di Wang (2024) on the other hand, specifically focuses on phonetic variations in English dialects, such as Eliza's transformation from Cockney to Received Pronunciation (RP), as indicators of social class and mobility. Furthermore, Berchez, Manoel, & Rezende (2024) offer an in-depth discourse analysis of how language in "My Fair Lady" reflects gender and class biases as well as social norms. Although these three studies have provided valuable insights into the sociolinguistic aspects of "My Fair Lady," there remains a gap in the explicit understanding of how situational code-switching dynamics and conversation function as the primary mechanisms in the representation and negotiation of social class identity in the film's

narrative, as well as how such language shifts reinforce or even blur existing class stereotypes. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing code-switching typology more closely as an indicator of the complexity of the relationship between language variation and social class, while also offering new insights into the fluidity of linguistic identity in the context of Eliza's character transformation.

This study will analyze code-switching in the 1964 American musical film, "My Fair Lady." The film, directed by George Cukor and written by Alan Jay Lerner, centers on a poor Cockney flower seller named Eliza Doolittle and phonetics expert Professor Henry Higgins. Higgins bets that he can teach Eliza to speak with the refined accent of an Edwardian aristocrat. The film explores Eliza's transformative journey, sharply highlighting themes of social class and personal growth through its dynamic dialogue and musical numbers. Through this case study, this research aims to uncover how language differences and code-switching function as markers of social class within the film's narrative.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a documentary study method, in line with language research methodology guidelines that emphasize the importance of textual and interactional data analysis (Mahsun, 2005). The focus is on analyzing in depth the phenomena of code-switching and language variation represented in the film My Fair Lady. The selection of this film is based on its rich representation of linguistic interactions that explicitly reflect and negotiate social hierarchies. The main data for this study consists of transcripts of dialogues and verbal interactions between characters that contain code-switching and language use related to social class. The data collection process involved repeated viewing of the film, careful transcription of relevant dialogues, and systematic recording of each instance of code-switching and language variation identified.

Data analysis was conducted systematically by combining sociolinguistic and pragmatic frameworks to uncover the patterns and motivations behind language switching, an essential approach in understanding language as a vehicle of culture (Sudaryanto, 2015). The analysis process included the identification and categorization of code-switching (both situational and conversational) and language variation that emerged in the dialogues. Each instance of code-switching is then analyzed within the social and cultural context of the conversation, using sociolinguistics to understand how cultural norms and social expectations influence the characters' linguistic choices. We also examine the pragmatic functions behind each code-switching instance, identifying its communicative purposes such as indicating identity, asserting status, creating humor, or even as a form of resistance. The code-switching patterns and language variations found are linked to the characters' social class representations, identifying language as a marker or negotiator of social status. It is important to note that the social and cultural context of the story's setting (early 20th-century England) is always a primary consideration, as it significantly influences how the characters speak and switch languages.

The primary focus of this research is on the characters of Eliza Doolittle and Professor Henry Higgins. Their selection is essential because the linguistic dynamics between them form the core of the exploration of the relationship between language and social class in the film. Eliza, a Cockney flower seller undergoing linguistic transformation, and Henry Higgins, a phonetician who acts as a catalyst for change, inherently showcase the phenomena of code-switching and language

variation that are central to this study. The analysis of their linguistic behavior and shifts in speech patterns throughout the film aims to uncover the sociopragmatic factors underlying their communication as they navigate social hierarchies. To ensure the validity of the data and the reliability of the findings, the dialogue was transcribed meticulously and cross-verified. Data interpretation is grounded in a robust sociolinguistic and pragmatic theoretical framework, and the analysis involves repeated and in-depth film observations, ensuring representative data.

Result and Discussion

This study analyzes the phenomenon of language variation and code-switching in the film "My Fair Lady" to reveal its relationship with social class. Our findings show how language not only reflects identity and social stratification, but also functions as a strategic tool for mobility and the formation of stereotypes. This section will further elaborate on these findings, divided into several key aspects: language as a marker of identity and social stratification; code-switching as a strategy for social mobility; code-switching and its pragmatic function in interaction; and how language contributes to the construction of gender and class stereotypes.

Language as a Marker of Identity and Social Stratification

Presents two important aspects of language behavior from a social perspective: the role of language in building social relationships and its function in conveying information about the speaker (Trudgill P, 2000). This highlights the close relationship between language and society. For example, when two English-speaking strangers are among others, they typically discuss topics such as the weather or their health. The purpose is to break the ice and make the interaction more relaxed. Additionally, such conversations help build and maintain relationships with others. Talking to others is also a way to learn about their occupation and social status or class. Listening to how someone speaks can provide information about their background and personality. This form of small talk can also be observed in the film "My Fair Lady," when Eliza learns how to speak with upper-class people in social situations.

According to Wardaugh (1993) understanding a particular dialect or language can help someone form bonds and feel solidarity with a community, as humans are social beings. On the other hand, if someone does not understand the dialect or language, they will be seen as an outsider within a particular speech or language group. Although there may be overlap between speech communities, the film does not highlight this because the boundaries are depicted as more rigid. However, this idea is indirectly conveyed in the film. Eliza struggles emotionally to return to her Cockney accent after acquiring the RP dialect. This finding reinforces the thesis that language functions as a strong marker of social identity, not only in interpersonal contexts but also in broader social structures, such as the rigid class stratification in early 20th-century England. Octawidyanata (2016) argues that social identity is an attempt to understand how a member improves their position and that of their group. Eliza's emotional struggle to maintain her Cockney accent, despite having mastered RP, shows how linguistic identity is ingrained in self-identity, even when there is external pressure to change for the sake of social mobility.

Code-Switching as a Strategy for Social Mobility

The film "My Fair Lady" explicitly shows how code-switching and language adaptation are crucial strategies for social mobility. Eliza's transformation from a Cockney dialect speaker to a

Received Pronunciation (RP) speaker is a clear example. Professor Henry Higgins, with his use of Standard RP, symbolizes the upper class, while Eliza, with her Cockney dialect, represents the working class. Eliza's linguistic change is not just about accent, but also about vocabulary and the social etiquette that accompanies it. The case of Alfred Doolittle further reinforces this argument; despite acquiring wealth, he still needed to adopt the language and behavior of the upper class to be fully accepted. This aligns with Di Wang's (2024) perspective, which focuses on phonetic variations in dialects as indicators of social class and mobility. Eliza even shows an emotional struggle to return to her Cockney accent after mastering RP, highlighting the depth of language identification with identity. Alfred began earning a good monthly income, but he still altered various aspects of his behavior to align with upper-class society, such as wearing hats and formal attire, marrying, regularly attending church, achieving higher social status and prestige as a result of his newly acquired wealth, and attracting many new friends and relatives who were "lost" and sought to capitalize on his good fortune. Since Alfred has a limited vocabulary, he will not be able to enter upper-class society unless he receives instruction or education in using the RP dialect while maintaining appropriate social etiquette and morality.

Factors determining social class differentiation include how someone dresses and the brands they wear, in this case referring to the main character of the film. Based on the accents and regional dialects used in conversations, Professor Henry Higgins can easily determine where the characters in the film live and where they come from. He pays particular attention to the characters' words and the context in which they are spoken. When comparing the speech patterns of the upper and lower classes, Henry Higgins' use of Standard RP English symbolizes the upper class. He pronounces his words clearly, as expected when speaking in Standard English. When expressing his controlled anger or displeasure towards Eliza, he combines his higher education with Standard English to insult her with phrases such as, "You are an embarrassment to the noble architecture of these columns," "You are an insult to the English language," and "You are crushing cabbage leaves."

Higgins' insults are beyond Eliza's comprehension because she lacks the education necessary to understand the insults directed at her. Eliza, a member of the lower class, speaks with a Cockney accent, commonly used by the poor working class. Eliza exhibits a series of rude characteristics that identify her as a member of the lower class, such as sniffling, rude behavior, refusal to bathe, and wiping her face with her sleeve instead of the handkerchief provided by Higgins, among others. Eliza also demonstrates a lack of social decorum by saying "ahhh" and sticking her tongue out at her father to show displeasure or disobedience. Cockney English has distinct pronunciations and lexical choices in speech. This indicates Eliza's social stratum in a particular location. This observation aligns with the concept of linguistic profiling, where linguistic characteristics, particularly accent and dialect, are instantly used to categorize individuals into specific social strata. Eliza's code-switching, both intentional and forced, illustrates a complex process of linguistic acculturation, in which social acceptance is highly dependent on one's ability to internalize and reproduce the linguistic norms of the dominant class. This shows that language education, as provided by Higgins, is not only about phonetics, but also about the reconfiguration of social identity.

Code-Switching and Pragmatic Functions in Social Interaction

An analysis of code-switching in "My Fair Lady" also reveals deeper pragmatic functions. Eliza often uses the sound "Aooow" to express disgust or anger, which is a characteristic of the

Cockney dialect. Another example is the use of "ain't" instead of "am not," "me" instead of "my," and 'afore' instead of "before," which are linguistic markers of the lower class. These are not merely grammatical differences, but also serve as expressions of identity and emotion that are characteristic of her speech community. The use of Eliza's "inappropriate" or 'unacceptable' language in the eyes of the upper class, such as shouting "Move aside!" at Ascot, demonstrates how social class norms restrict linguistic expression. This is consistent with sociolinguistic studies that view language as a representation of symbolic power and a reflection of prevailing class norms, as also discussed by Berchez, Manoel, & Rezende (2024) regarding gender and class bias.

For example, Eliza often uses the sound "Aooow" to express disgust or anger toward a situation. Eliza using the phrase "aooow." In the sentence, "Aooow! I'm not dirty. I've cleaned my face, and before I came, I already did it," she says "ain't" instead of "am not," "me" instead of "my," "afore" instead of "before," and 'come' instead of "came." She also adds "I did" at the end of her statement to convince others of her actions. Representation of Social Class in Media: "My Fair Lady" can be seen as a social critique of rigid class norms. This research can analyze how the film or play uses language and code-switching to critique or highlight social injustice. The Role of Education: Education in "My Fair Lady" is often depicted as the key to social change. This research can discuss how language education is positioned as a tool for social change and its impact on individuals and society. The pragmatic function of this code-switching can be interpreted as Eliza's attempt to negotiate her identity, both to adapt to a new social context and to reaffirm her origins. This code-switching is not merely a situational response but a strategic action reflecting the character's internal struggle. This demonstrates that code-switching is not always a linguistic failure but often a conscious choice to achieve specific communicative goals, such as showing solidarity, self-expression, or even resistance to dominant norms.

Language and Gender and Class Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are prominent in "My Fair Lady". Men and women have different acceptable behaviors and language. The terms used to refer to men and women are also different and do not always have the same meaning. Pairings such as gentleman-lady, man-woman, and boy-girl are used. Despite being in her early twenties, Eliza is often referred to as a "girl" due to her lower-class background. Her lack of proper education causes the upper-class people she encounters to view her as immature and unworthy of the title "woman." Mrs. Eynsford-Hill, for example, refers to Eliza as a lower-class woman when she says "my girl." At the market, Henry Higgins insults Eliza by calling her a "silly girl." Then Pickering calls her a "girl" at the market. Even Mrs. Pearce scolds Eliza at Higgins' house, calling her a "silly girl." Throughout the film, Eliza is repeatedly referred to as a 'girl' until she acquires the manners and social etiquette of the upper class and earns the right to be called a "woman."

Mrs. Eynsford-Hill, for example, refers to Eliza as a lower-class woman when she says "my girl." At the market, Henry Higgins criticizes Eliza, calling her a "silly girl." Pickering then calls her a 'girl' at the market. Even Mrs. Pearce scolds Eliza at Higgins' house, calling her an "unreasonable girl." Throughout the film, Eliza is repeatedly referred to as a "girl" until she learns upper-class etiquette and social manners and earns the right to be called a "woman." Higgins and Pickering's actions suggest that what a woman needs to be considered a "lady" is a good accent, education, and social grace. With these characteristics, she becomes a suitable candidate for marriage in her future life. Marriage, according to upper-class culture, is the ultimate goal of a woman's happiness

and fulfillment. Eliza, on the other hand, prefers to be independent rather than sell herself or become someone's symbolic bride. She plans to support herself by opening a flower shop. Eliza is portrayed as an independent woman, but in this film, a woman must be socially acceptable to be considered a suitable choice for a man.

The ideals of a culture can influence language and behavior, just as the environment has a significant impact on dialect and behavior in shaping culture and customs. According to Trudgill (2000), the most interesting way this happens is through a phenomenon known as taboo. He defines taboo as: "behavior that is considered forbidden by supernatural means, or considered immoral or inappropriate." In language, taboo refers to things that are not said, particularly phrases and idioms that are not used. Taboo words also vary based on social status. Women are more likely to use forbidden terms than men because they are expected to be more respectful and behave better. In contemporary British society, men are more likely to swear and use foul language than women. Women are also expected to behave better than men.

That is why an upper-class woman faints when she hears Eliza yell, "Move your bloomin' arse!" at Ascot, because such language is unusual for a lady. Taboo terms and slang idioms among the lower class include "bloomin'", "blimey", "garn", "bloody", "saucy", "he's off his chump", "blighters", "ruddy", "arse", "done her in", "pinched it", "ladling", "bit off the spoon", "sniggering", and so on. Eliza's behavior often shocks upper-class women because she is a lower-class woman. In the culture represented in the film, the values of a "good" woman were created by language and behavior designed to attract and earn men's respect. Eliza, on the other hand, is a woman who is known for her bad manners, particularly with males. As a result, she is sidelined and undervalued in this film's narrative. The film teaches us that ethics and morality should be prioritized, and that we should be able to change our words and speech so that others will respect us. The story from this movie teaches us that language reflects communication and code-switching that occurs in social strata in everyday life. Words, phrases, and language can be used to identify behavior, especially in social communication where intonation becomes important. This finding critically underscores how language functions as an instrument to affirm and perpetuate social and gender hierarchies. The upper-class character's designation of Eliza as a "girl," regardless of her age, reflects the existence of socially controlled language, where individuals are judged based on their linguistic conformity to the norms of the dominant class. The linguistic taboos depicted, particularly in the use of words by women, show how these norms are far stricter for women, tying their identity and social acceptance to linguistic compliance. This reinforces the view that language in "My Fair Lady" not only reflects but also actively shapes and reinforces existing stereotypes.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively examines the relationship between language variation and social class through the phenomenon of code-switching in the film My Fair Lady. The main findings confirm that language serves as a fundamental marker of social identity, where dialect differences, particularly between Eliza Doolittle's Cockney accent and Professor Henry Higgins' Received Pronunciation (RP), clearly represent and reinforce the rigid class stratification in Edwardian English society. Code-switching proves to be an essential linguistic strategy for Eliza in navigating and shaping her new social identity. Her transformation from a Cockney speaker to an RP speaker is not merely a phonetic change but a social mobility driven by the adoption of upper-class

linguistic norms. The pragmatic function of code-switching, as seen in Eliza's struggle between her original expressions and the adoption of "appropriate" language, demonstrates that linguistic choices are conscious actions aimed at achieving social acceptance, while also occasionally serving as a medium of resistance against class expectations. Furthermore, this analysis reveals how language actively contributes to the construction of gender and class stereotypes, where certain terms and speech patterns are used to categorize individuals, particularly women, into lower or higher social categories based on their adherence to dominant linguistic norms.

The practical implications of this research are highly relevant in language education, particularly in teaching the importance of language variation and the development of sociolinguistic awareness. Language teachers and educators can utilize films such as My Fair Lady as rich case studies to discuss how language interacts with identity, power, and social dynamics. This will help learners understand that language proficiency is not only about grammar and vocabulary, but also about the social context and cultural implications of linguistic choices.

For further research, it is recommended to explore in greater depth audience responses to code-switching and language variation in films, both from the perspective of the source culture and the receiving culture. Comparative research on other films that address similar themes will also enrich our understanding of the linguistic representation of social class in the media. Additionally, studies on how linguistic identity affects the mental health or social psychology of individuals who experience class mobility through language change will be an interesting area of research and provide long-term contributions to the field of sociolinguistics.

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