The Paradox of Linguistic Norms and Empowerment: Interpreting My Fair Lady through Foucault's Concept of Power

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Abstract: Unlike traditional macro-power theories, Foucault's micro-power theory reveals the complex inter-constructive relationship between linguistic norms and social power structures. His assertion that "discourse is power" provides a crucial perspective for analyzing the mechanisms of power operation within linguistic practices[3]. This study employs Foucault's power theory as its analytical framework. Through an in-depth interpretation of the movie My Fair Lady, it uncovers the inherent paradox between linguistic norms and subject empowerment, thereby transcending conventional boundaries in film analysis. This approach not only offers a novel theoretical pathway for interpreting My Fair Lady but also deepens the practical significance of Foucault's power theory within cultural criticism, exposing the concealed power dynamics within linguistic practices and their dialectical shaping of subject freedom.

Keywords: Power; Language; Norms and Reconstruction; My Fair Lady

1. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright and critic, was a pioneer of 20th-century Western theatrical reform and recipient of the 1925 Nobel Prize in Literature. His works are renowned for their incisive social critique and linguistic satire, adeptly exposing power structures and discursive hegemony through dramatic conflict. In Pygmalion (1913), Shaw centers a linguistic experiment to explore the dialectical interplay of class, gender, and identity construction, demonstrating how linguistic norms function as instruments of disciplinary power. The subsequent movie adaptation My Fair Lady (1964) further visualized the "empowerment paradox"-where subjects achieve "liberation" through acquiring dominant discourse, yet simultaneously become incorporated into established power structures. Foucault's theory of power-knowledge provides a crucial framework for interpreting this paradox, revealing the concealed mechanisms of power at work behind language acquisition.

During Shaw's era, Received Pronunciation (RP) functioned as a sociolinguistic phenomenon carrying pronounced social stratification. The phonetic system had become a vital marker of social identity, with the upper classes generally disparaging regional dialects. In the preface to his play Pygmalion, Shaw incisively exposed language's socio-semiotic nature: "When one Englishman begins to speak, another Englishman immediately assumes a look of contempt." This evolution in linguistic attitudes was intrinsically linked to shifts in social structure: by the mid-18th century (1762), pronunciation was still regarded as a decorative element of speech; yet by the early 19th century (1833), it had transformed into a vital marker of social class. A crucial distinction emerges between Shaw's original play and its cinematic adaptation: while Pygmalion maintains its focus on linguistic reform as social critique, particularly through Eliza's defiant rejection of Higgins' control in the final act, My Fair Lady shifts toward romanticizing Eliza's transformation and emotional reconciliation, thereby softening the original's ideological edge. This paper examines the linguistic norms, subject reconstruction, and empowerment paradox in the movie My Fair Lady through the lens of Foucault's theory of power.

2. An Overview of Foucault's Theory of Knowledge and Power

2.1 Foucault's Concept of Power

Traditionally, power was visible and demonstrative, discovering its origins in the very act of mobilizing its forces.[1] However, disciplinary power operates through its own invisibility, imposing a principle of forced visibility upon its subjects. Michel Foucault's theory of power subverts the traditional political

philosophical framework for understanding power, shifting the study of power from macro-level institutional analysis to the micro-level of discursive practices. Foucault contends that power is not monopolized by specific individuals or institutions, but rather diffuses throughout social networks, being exercised through discursive practices. Discourse produces knowledge, which in turn reinforces power structures[2]. For instance, psychiatric discourse defines certain behaviors as 'madness', thereby granting physicians the power to control those individuals. Within disciplinary systems, these subjects must be made visible. Their visibility ensures power's domination over them[1][4]. It is precisely the fact that the disciplined are constantly seen and can be seen at any moment that keeps them perpetually in a state of subjugation. Moreover, power does not assert itself through symbols of authority or by imposing its mark upon subjects; rather, it controls them through mechanisms that objectify them. Thus, the exercise of power in modern society has shifted from violent intimidation to discursive infiltration, and from macro-level control to micro-level discipline.

2.2 Foucault's Relationship Between "Knowledge" and "Power"

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault observes that power generates knowledge; power and knowledge are directly intertwined. Power relations cannot exist without the corresponding construction of a field of knowledge, nor can knowledge emerge without simultaneously presupposing and constituting power relations. The "power-knowledge" concept introduced in The History of Sexuality dismantles the traditional epistemological opposition between truth and power. Consequently, analysis of these "power-knowledge relations" should not be grounded in the question of whether the knowing subject is free relative to the power system. Instead, the knowing subject, the object of knowledge, and the modes of cognition should be regarded as the fundamental interrelationships within power-knowledge and the manifold effects of their historical transformations[3][5][7]. In short, power-knowledge, permeating the development, contradictions, and struggles that constitute it, determines the form of knowledge and its possible domains.

3. The Mechanisms of Power Operation in

My Fair Lady

3.1 Normalizing Judgment

Normalizing judgment constitutes a specific technique of power that treats individuals both as objects and instruments of discipline. Professor Higgins' rejection of Eliza Doolittle's dialect and vulgar expressions in the movie essentially enacts a linguistic "purification". Through phonetic training, grammatical correction, and lexical substitution, he denigrates Eliza's original speech as a symbol of "uncivilized" behavior while elevating Received Pronunciation (RP) as an emblem of "refinement". This forced internalization of linguistic norms embodies what Foucault termed "normative adjudication"-where power categorizes individuals hierarchically through distinctions like "correct/incorrect" and "refined/vulgar," then corrects them to conform to ruling-class standards[3]. Professor Higgins instructs Eliza to practice standard pronunciation by steadying a candle flame while reciting lines like "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain." The candle's physical stability becomes an objective measure of "correct" pronunciation, transforming abstract linguistic norms into quantifiable bodily actions. This training method echoes Foucault's concept of "technologies of power"-where linguistic norms are internalized into bodily memory through repetitive drills.

3.2 Hierarchical Surveillance

Hierarchical surveillance, a common tool of discipline and punishment, typically forms a power "pyramid." This pyramid establishes a tightly woven network of power relations through top-down communication. Every individual living under disciplinary power structures is both surveiller and surveilled, and it is precisely within this network that power dynamics take effect. The physical space of Higgins Manor implicitly employs the power control techniques of penitentiary architecture. The circular layout of the voice laboratory keeps trainees perpetually within visual surveillance. From fundamental pronunciation exercises to advanced social etiquette instruction, their bodies are deconstructed into manipulable organ components. Vocal cord vibration frequency, tongue position angle, and lip opening degree all become quantifiable normative parameters.

3.3 Inspection

Foucault observes that normative adjudication relies on a continuous mechanism of "inspection"-placing individuals within visibility through observation, evaluation, and documentation, compelling self-surveillance[6]. Two emblematic scenes in the movie, the Royal Horse Racing Club and the embassy ball's "language test," epitomize how power exercises control through social gaze. When Eliza successfully passes the linguistic test at the ball and is mistaken for a Hungarian princess, it demonstrates that her "ladylike identity" hinges entirely on the precise replication of linguistic norms. On one hand, aristocrats as "inspectors" judge her class affiliation through language; on the other, Eliza is compelled to internalize external norms as self-identity, gaining social recognition by performing the "lady" role.

4. The Empowerment Paradox and Subject Reconstruction in My Fair Lady

4.1 The Duality of Empowerment

Eliza's linguistic transformation grants her opportunities for social ascent, appearing as "empowerment" yet trapping her within a more insidious structure of domination. The movie employs high-angle shots of the aristocratic audience's scrutinizing gaze, constructing a Foucaultdian "panoptic" power structure. The more perfected Eliza's standardized vocal performance becomes, the more her subjectivity is reduced to an object of observation. Here the empowerment paradox reaches its zenith: enhanced linguistic competence transforms the subject into a standardized exhibit of power, where so-called "success" is merely a meticulously orchestrated puppet show of authority.

4.2 Reconstruction of Subjectivity

Foucault's "power producing subjects": Eliza's "lady" identity is a product of disciplinary power, her subjectivity redefined by discursive authority[8]. Her transformation from flower girl to aristocratic lady constitutes a complete reconstruction process. In the opening scene of My Fair Lady, Professor Higgins declares upon first meeting Eliza that he can, within three months, train her to speak with an aristocratic accent and bearing befitting a countess. This proclamation initially serves merely to demonstrate his linguistic prowess, not a genuine intent to transform Eliza. Yet, contrary to

Higgins' expectations, Eliza, stung by wounded pride, proactively sought him out the following day to request tuition, voluntarily paying her fees and thereby initiating their pedagogical relationship.

Viewed through Foucault's lens of the empowerment paradox, this ostensibly "teaching" relationship harbors profound power dynamics. Higgins treats Eliza as an object for linguistic experimentation rather than an autonomous learner. This is particularly evident in his treatment of her: he orders servants to strip her of her clothes and wrap her body in paper. This act carries clear connotations of objectification. Worse still, when confronted with the question of her accommodation, he contemptuously suggests placing Eliza "in the dustbin." Such words and actions not only expose Higgins's disparagement of Eliza's social status and linguistic abilities but also reveal his perception of her as disposable "rubbish"-raw material awaiting transformation.

Yet Eliza's proactive act of seeking help signifies the initial effort towards reconstructing her subjectivity. She voluntarily enters the field of power relations, attempting to achieve social mobility and identity transformation through linguistic reshaping. Despite Higgins' attempts to exert complete control over her body and expression, Eliza practices a strategy of self-empowerment through the very act of receiving education. Here, Foucault's paradoxical assertion that "power simultaneously represses and produces subjects" becomes evident: the disciplinary power Higgins wields, intended to fashion a "countess" conforming to upper-class standards, simultaneously sparks Eliza's resistance. Within her submission, she reconstructs her selfhood and asserts her right to speech.

Thus, this experiment concerns not merely vocal transformation but constitutes a micro-practice centered on the reshaping of identity, power, and subjectivity. Eliza's transformation from an objectified "trash" to an aristocratic figure reveals the inherent paradox of empowerment: she is both the object being shaped and the subject actively engaged in her own metamorphosis[9]. Higgins' disciplinary power, though oppressive, unexpectedly affords Eliza the possibility of reconstructing her social identity.

4.3 Theory of "Resistance Spaces"

Final Awakening: Eliza's challenge to Higgins-"What am I?"-signals her refusal to be objectified and her attempt to reclaim the right to self-definition. The embassy ball scene becomes the turning point in her awakening self-awareness. After the ball, Eliza is forced to confront the question of her own existence. She begins to perceive the hollowness beneath high society's glamor, realizing that beyond language and etiquette, this class possesses no moral or human superiority. She yearns for a more authentic validation of her worth. When Higgins declares "Thank God it's over" to mark the experiment's conclusion, Eliza's sudden flinch signifies her awakening from this manipulated illusion. She realizes she has been nothing but an object in others' power games, her emotions and future utterly insignificant to them.

Her subsequent emotional outburst-hurlings slippers and vociferous questioning-echoes Foucault's notion of the potential emergence of a "space of resistance[9][10]." Refusing to remain a malleable, observable object, she resolutely departs. This act constitutes not merely defiance against Higgins's individual authority, but a challenge to the entire societal power structure. Her original aspiration was never to ascend among the privileged, but to gain dignity and the capacity for autonomous existence through education.

Ultimately, Eliza recognized that "no common feeling" could exist between her and the class Higgins represented. The equality and authentic relationships she sought were unattainable within that power structure. Thus, she resolutely departed, completing her transformation from passive object to active subject. This process exemplifies how, in Foucault's theory, the subjectivity of resistance seeks self-definition within power relations. By refusing discipline and choosing to depart from the established order, Eliza achieves the reconstruction and liberation of her identity. Power and resistance coexist here; her departure is not absolute freedom, yet it carves a fissure within the power network for self-reconstruction.

5. Conclusion

This paper employs Foucault's theory of micropower as its framework[11]. Through close textual analysis and plot examination of My Fair Lady, it reveals the mutual constitution between linguistic norms and social power structures, alongside the paradox of empowerment faced by subjects within power networks. The linguistic authority embodied by Higgins employs mechanisms such as "normative adjudication," "hierarchical surveillance," and "examination" to incorporate Eliza's body and discourse into the order of high society, transforming her into a "visible object" conforming to power standards.

Yet power, while suppressing, simultaneously generates the potential for resistance. Eliza's final emotional outburst and resolute departure signify her transformation from a disciplined object into a self-aware subject. By rejecting assigned identities and questioning the naturalness of power relations, she reclaims the right to self-definition within what Foucault termed "spaces of resistance." This process reveals both the coexistence of vulnerability and agency within power structures, and the paradox that purported "empowerment" often embeds new forms of domination.

By applying Foucault's power theory to cultural text analysis, this study not only offers a fresh interpretative approach to My Fair Lady but also extends the explanatory power of power theory across the intersections of pedagogy, class, and linguistic practice. Future research may further examine diverse manifestations of linguistic discipline and subject resistance across different socio-cultural contexts, alongside the evolution of discursive power mechanisms in the new media era, thereby deepening our dynamic understanding of the complex interplay between power, language, and subjectivity.

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