"THE ENGLISH HAVE NO RESPECT FOR THEIR LANGUAGE": THE PARADOX OF THE ENGLISH STEREOTYPE IN G. B. SHAW'S *PYGMALION*

Zsuzsanna Ajtony

Abstract: The paper discusses several hypostases of the English stereotype as revealed in the verbal behaviour of different characters in G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, concentrating especially on the interpersonal verbal encounters between Professor Higgins, Eliza Doolittle and Colonel Pickering and their environment. Starting from the theoretical premise that stereotypes are extendable forms of social cognition, the emergence of ethnic stereotypes is followed, as they unfold through conversational styles, forms of address and politeness strategies. The play is approached with the help of micro-sociolinguistic methods, focusing on face-to-face conversational interactions between characters. The conclusion of the article is that in *Pygmalion* some of the characters (the "conventional" ones) are biased by their English ethnicity, the Englishness of others (of the "creative" ones) is less foregrounded, it appears in several, paradoxically related forms, opening to the intertextual interpretation of the play, as acceptable.

Keywords: ethnic stereotypes, intertextuality, middle-class morality, politeness strategies, social identity

1. Introduction

As widely known, the popular 1941 screen version of *Pygmalion* is the story of a flower girl who passes as a duchess after taking phonetics lessons. However, this proves to be only the surface level of the play. The "deep structure", if carefully approached, reveals other, more non-conventional interpretations to the play. This paper proposes to offer one of these: the intertextual interpretation of the title offers a reading of the play as a discussion about the condition of the creator and his creation, and his relationship to other, less creative characters.

Primarily, it is the title that suggests this intertextual interpretation. The myth which inspired the playwright is about the legendary figure of Cyprus, Pygmalion, most familiar from Ovid's *Metamorphoses, X*. In Ovid's narrative, he was a sculptor who carved a woman out of ivory. The statue became so realistic that he fell in love with it/her and prayed to Aphrodite who felt pity for him, bringing the statue to life. The ancient Greek story ends happily: Pygmalion and his Galatea are united in matrimony and later they have a son.

Nevertheless, the Shavian version does not have such an obvious ending. Shaw himself offered at least two endings to his play. One of them is the sequel suggesting that Freddy and Eliza would marry, the other one ends with Eliza's humble return to Higgins. This ambivalence also suggests the possibility of multiple readings. What the detailed analysis of the characters' speech and linguistic behaviour suggests, however, proves to be a reading according to which Shaw's version is a modern re-interpretation of the Greek myth, focusing on the creator's state and his attitude to the world, as well as the relationship between Higgins, the artist and his creation, Galatea-Eliza who receives a new personality, acquires an independent life as the result of the teaching process.

Like in the ancient myth, in Shaw's *Pygmalion* the creator becomes attached to his creation, to an object of art. His feelings for Eliza are not feelings for a person, for an equal of his, for a possible companion. At the end of the phonetic experiment, Higgins gets used to the object-Eliza, the slipper-fetcher, the obedient student and does not realize that the act of creation was so successful that in the meantime the object revived, has become independent

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

and has gained so much self-respect (in spite of all the ordeal she went through), that she is able to live life on her own.

Higgins is the creator who feels at ease in the process of creation, and in the heat of teaching (in the process of modelling) he forgets about manners, disregarding everybody else around him. There is only one character, Doolittle, who he shares his rhetoric talent with and whom he considers his equal, in spite of the dustman's lower social status. Higgins appreciates and respects all those who are as creative as himself and treats those less creative with contempt. This superiority is manifest in his language use and lack of manners whenever addressing an "inferior" interlocutor. In this sense, he violates the rules of middle-class morality, scandalizes his mother and his housekeeper who try to direct him towards a more conventional way of speaking and behaving.

Accordingly, the play displays – on the one hand – a set of "conventional" characters: Colonel Pickering, Mrs Pierce, Mrs Higgins and Freddy. In this sense, they are closer to the British stereotype, they fit the frame of this schema. On the other hand, Higgins and Doolittle exceed the limits of the Britishness-schema; they are those who prove to be different from the above mentioned conventional characters.

2. Theoretical background and methodology

In order to understand why so many characters can still be part of one single stereotype, the nature of stereotypes has to be revealed. As the literature of the domain suggests, stereotypes act like schemas. A schema is conceptualized as a cognitive structure, which contains general expectations and knowledge of the world. This may include general expectations about people, social roles, events, and how to behave in certain situations. Schema theory suggests that we use such mental structures to select and process incoming information from the social environment. Macrae et al. (1994: 38) state that "[a]s with any schema, we use our stereotypes to make sense of the world", and further note that "having a schema allows you to process information more quickly and efficiently, but it also allows you to distort information to make it fit your schema better". According to Woolfolk et al. (2007: 202), "a schema can be applied in many contexts, depending on what part of the schema is relevant". A stereotype is "a schema generalizing about the shared attributes of a group or class of people; when automatically activated, it provides biased assistance to encoding and remembering information about group members" (Barone et al. 1997: 213). Stereotypes, as schemas, direct mental resources, guide encoding and retrieval of information, and save cognitive energy – in short, they make perception of people and groups more efficient (see Augoustinos et al. 2006: 244).

Social cognition research distinguishes different types of schemata. Of these, *role schemas* refer to the knowledge structure people have of the norms and expected behaviours of specific role positions in society. Age, gender, race or ethnicity are all ascribed roles; those who take up these roles have little control over them. Stereotypes belong to a type of schema which organizes information and knowledge about people from different social categories. They are mental representations of social groups and their member that are widely shared in a culture. Based on this shared knowledge and on personal experience, people form an image of an ethnic group and whenever getting acquainted with a new "specimen" of this ethnic group, cognition requires that the stereotype should be activated. Comparison between this newly acquired information and the pre-exiting stereotypical image leads the cognitive agent to evaluate this new input as either stereotype consistent or stereotype inconsistent. Consequently, all the new information will be built into the stereotype.

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

We propose to examine the Shavian play from an interactional sociolinguistic perspective, taking it as a primary sociological corpus, focusing on the characters' ethnic identity. It is also assumed that their ethnic identity is only one facet of their identity and within the analysis all the social variables that shape the described identity of the characters are related to their linguistic behaviour. Ethnicity – as described by the specialist literature – is relational, i.e. ethnicity is a property of a relationship between two or several groups, not a property of a group, it exists *between* and not *within* groups (Eriksen 2001). Besides, some of the characters' verbal behaviour is examined as it reveals itself during their interaction with other characters. Given the fact that in the play under discussion all characters are British, it is not their language, the primary marker of ethnic identity, that distinguishes them from each other. The analyst will have to find other, more subtle forms that build up their Britishness[1], covert forms which are hidden within such strategies of communication like politeness strategies, forms of address, naming practices, gender topics, etc.

3. British ethnic identity in *Pygmalion*

The opening scene of the play, taking place in the portico of St Paul's Church, gives a colourful picture of the class-divided British society. The characters that appear there are easily distinguishable by their accents: some working class people, some of them quite deferential, others sarcastically impolite, the impoverished middle-class family (the Eynsford Hills), the wealthy Anglo-Indian, Colonel Pickering, and the self-sufficient note-taker, professor of phonetics, Henry Higgins. Later, we also get acquainted with other characters belonging to different classes, like Eliza Doolittle, the kerbstone flower girl with her kerbstone English, Mrs Pierce, Prof. Higgins' housekeeper, Mr Doolittle, Eliza's father, a dustman by trade, or Mrs Higgins, the professor's mother, also of higher middle class descent. However, as the plot of the play unfolds, it becomes clear that it is not speech patterns (Cockney English vs. Standard English) that separate them. In actual fact, it is manners that provide the clue to the character contrast in the play. The accents are – so to speak – merely their outer clothing.

Some characters, who have exquisite manners (like Mrs Higgins), are contrasted to the lack of manners in characters like Eliza or Clara Eynsford Hill. Middle class morality appears in both Eliza and Clara's aggressiveness. In spite of the fact that they come from two different worlds, one of them from the gutter, the other from an impoverished middle class family, they are both vulgar in their own way. While Eliza's vulgarity is a "natural" lower class vulgarity of a flower girl, Clara's is less understandable; Eliza's vulgarity is familiar as she tries to coax money from prospective customers; her assertive behaviour springs from her strong desire to escape from the slums into the bourgeois world, which can offer her some kind of independence and self-respect. However, the idea of vulgarity is not limited to the lower classes. Clara is ambitious, pushing in her dealings with strangers, as vulgarly suspicious and quick to take offence, rebuking Professor Higgins: "Don't dare speak to me" (Shaw 1916/1984: 25).

Manners – one of the key features of stereotypical British behaviour – and, strongly connected to it, middle class morality is what bring the characters together, and at the same time, as we have seen in the case of Eliza and Clara, separate them from each other. To a certain extent, each and every character of the play obeys the principles of good manners and

[1] In this paper I am using the terms of Britishness and Englishness interchangeably.

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

"proper" behaviour. But what distinguishes them from each other is exactly the main character's (the creator's) attitude towards them.

The line of the less creative, and therefore more typically, English characters is opened by Mrs Higgins and Mrs Pierce, the two "mother figures" in the play, but also Colonel Pickering. They all act as models of stereotypical British language and behaviour. They have the role to teach other characters manners and proper language use. Mrs Higgins belongs to the upper middle class. The description of her room betrays her Englishness (typically British furniture: Chippendale chair, she grew up within the decorative art of Morris and Burne Jones). She is a considerate person, caring for Eliza from the moment she meets her. However, what is a typical stereotype connected to her person is the subject of health. Her son suggests two "safe" discussion topics for Eliza during her at-home party to which her reaction is quite strange:

(1) HIGGINS: (...) She's to keep to two subjects: the weather and everybody's health – Fine day and How do you do, you know – and not to let herself go on things in general. That will be safe.
MRS HIGGINS. Safe! To talk about our health! About our insides! Perhaps about our outsides! How could you be so silly, Henry? (Shaw 1916/1984: 69)

For Mrs Higgins, the subject of health seems to be a subject to avoid and this brings her close to the British stereotype in the sense that according to it the British have a certain kind of inhibition as to their feelings, their inside, including health[2].

Mrs Pierce, similarly, displays an extremely polite, even ultra-polite, language behaviour. This can be explained by the fact that she is Professor Higgins' housekeeper, i.e. of a lower social rank than Mrs Higgins; so when she addresses the professor, her social status requires that she should use more elaborate, more polite forms[3]:

(2) MRS PEARCE. [*at the door*] *I just wish to trouble you with a word, if I may*, Mr Higgins. (Shaw 1916/1984: 50)
(3) MRS PEARCE. [...] Then *might* I ask you not to come down to breakfast in your dressing-gown ... And *if you would be so good* as not to eat everything off the same plate and *to remember* not to put the porridge saucepan out of your hand on the clean tablecloth, it would be a better example to the girl. (Shaw 1916/1984: 52)

Mrs Pierce's remarks reveal that in fact she is asking her superior to do or not to do something, but the imperatives are preceded by hedges to avoid threatening her interlocutor's face directly. She is applying negative politeness strategies, a common conversational strategy in British culture. Similarly, she is using the modal verb *might* in her request to make her imperative milder and, at the same time, this modal suggests the most polite attitude towards the state of affairs. She observes that bad language is not used in her and other ladies' presence:

[2] "The 'invasion of privacy' … is particularly relevant for the reserved and inhibited English, for whom privacy is an especially serious matter. […] a disproportionate number of our most influential social rules and maxims are concerned with the maintenance of privacy: we are taught to mind our own business, not to pry, to keep ourselves to ourselves, not to make a scene or a fuss or draw attention to ourselves, and never to wash our dirty linen in public. It is worth noting here that 'How are you?' is only treated as a 'real' question among very close personal friends or family; everywhere else, the automatic, ritual response is 'Fine, thanks', 'OK, thanks', 'Oh, mustn't grumble', 'Not bad, thanks' or some equivalent, whatever your physical or mental state. If you are terminally ill, it is acceptable to say 'Not bad, considering'" (Fox 2005: 44).
[3] The italics in the quotes are my emphasis.

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

(4) MRS PEARCE. ... Mr Higgins: will you please be very particular what you say before the girl? ... Now it doesn't matter before me: I'm used to it. But you really must not swear before the girl. (Shaw1916/1984: 51)

She considers morals and proper language the most important issue in life and she considers it her duty to protect morals in the house. However, she is not posing with this responsibility, she honestly believes that morals keep life going. In this sense, she is a stricter "mother" to Higgins than Mrs Higgins herself. She draws the professor's attention to his insensitivity and cold superhuman attitude he displays towards other people:

(5) MRS PEARCE. Well, the matter is, sir, that you cant take a girl up like that as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach. (Shaw 1916/1984: 42)

In certain cases, she applies more direct face threatening acts: she even scolds her master for disobeying the moral code of society.

(6) MRS PEARCE. Nonsense, sir. You mustn't talk like that to her. (Shaw 1916/1984: 42)

The first sentence of her turn contains an elliptical structure, which conversationally implies: "You are talking nonsense." This evaluative declarative is followed by a polite form of address (*sir*): even in such an emotion-loaded situation she does not forget who she is talking to. The follow up contains a modal verb of prohibition, which is again another face-threatening act, still milder than as if it were a direct imperative.

Mrs Pierce is a model of formality in Wimpole Street. In her social position, she is conscious that she must behave at all times. As opposed to the aristocrats around her who compensate for their moral and mannerly "escapades" with their fortune, she cannot afford to be less formal.[4]

The above mentioned two ladies' use of more polite, exquisite manners and verbal behaviour may be due to their gender, as well. At a stereotypical level, politeness is often considered to be a woman's concern, in the sense that stereotypes of how women in general should behave are in fact rather a prototypical description of white, middle-class women's behaviour in relation to politeness (Mills 2003: 203). The teaching and enforcement of "manners" are often considered to be the preserve of women. Femininity, that set of varied and changing characteristics which have been rather arbitrarily associated with women in general, has an association with politeness, self-effacement, weakness, vulnerability, and friendliness. This manifests itself in the type of language practices which Lakoff (1975) describes as "talking like a lady". Women's linguistic behaviour is often characterised as being concerned with co-operation (more positively polite than men) and avoidance of conflict (more negatively polite than men).

However, in the play there is another character, a male this time, who displays the same politeness strategies as his lady counterparts: this is Colonel Pickering. The negative politeness strategies, his exquisite manners reflect his serious concern for middle class morals; he agrees with Mrs Pearce in that for the flower girl to be able to stay in a house where two

[4] A similar attitude can be seen in P. G. Wodehouse's well-known *Jeeves* stories, where Jeeves, the valet, "the gentleman's personal gentleman", behaves in a very formal manner, while his master, Bertie Wooster, and his aristocratic friends allow themselves all kinds of informal language and behaviour.

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

bachelors live, her status should be cleared. So he enquires about Higgins' attitude towards this question:

(7) PICKERING. *Excuse the straight question*, Higgins. Are you a man of good character where women are concerned? (Shaw 1916/1984: 49)

He introduces his direct questions by hedging it, obviously in the most polite manner possible. He does not want to threaten his fellow linguist's face by a direct, bald on record question, he makes it milder by the hedge. Their equal status is also indicated by his form of address in the form of a family name, in the present context being a sign of solidarity. Then he continues:

(8) PICKERING [*rising and standing over him gravely*] Come, Higgins! You know what I mean. If I'm to be in this business I shall feel responsible for that girl. I hope it's understood that no advantage is to be taken of her position. (Shaw 1916/1984: 50)

The auxiliary verb *shall* also contains a modal shadow, that of order. The phrase *to be to* in his last statement suggests a very serious commitment from his part to watch that morals are obeyed. Moreover, the use of the passive *it's understood* underlines his formal language use, also supporting his words by body language and gestures to indicate that what he means is rather serious.

Another typical middle class trait is his attitude towards marriage, which he calls "a sacred institution". He strongly disapproves of two people living together without being married, addressing his words to Doolittle, Elisa's father:

(9) PICKERING. Why dont you marry that missus of yours? I rather draw the line at encouraging that sort of immortality. (Shaw 1916/1984: 59)

His attitude to Eliza also betrays his true character of a gentleman. He only calls her by the deferential form of address and her family name: Miss Doolittle. He treats her like a real lady even when she is still a kerbstone flower girl. Right from the beginning he can see the independent woman in her and she will return this "favour" at the end of the play when it is Eliza who asks him to call her by her first name, this time a form of equality and solidarity. Eliza assesses their relationship with the following remark:

(10) LIZA. […] You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), *the difference between a lady and a lower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated*. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.
PICKERING. Well, this is really very nice of you, Miss Doolittle.
LIZA. And I should like you to call me Eliza now, if you would. (Shaw 1916/1984: 122)

4. The creator and his fellow spirit

While Pickering is always considerate towards the young girl, treating her like a lady even when she is selling flowers on the corner of Tottenham Court Road, Professor Higgins is

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

his opposite: he is very rude and impolite to her, yells at her, threatens her, calls her by her first name, or even worse, calls her names, deeply insulting her:

(11) HIGGINS. […] you squashed cabbage leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns, you incarnate insult to the English language… (Shaw 1916/1984: 27-28)

(12) HIGGINS. […] You! Presumptuous insect! / The creature is nervous./ draggletailed guttersnipe! (Shaw 1916/1984: 41)

(13) HIGGINS. Claws in, you cat. / How dare you shew your temper to me? Sit down and be quiet. [*He throws her roughly into the easy-chair.*] (Shaw 1916/1984: 100)

He is "a confirmed old bachelor" who takes off his boots at home in other people's presence and wipes his hands in his dressing gown. Even her mother, Mrs Higgins explicitly admits that her "celebrated son has no manners".

Henry Higgins, who claims to understand all about *how* people talk, grasps nothing of what they *mean*. He is brutal in using Eliza as an amusing experiment (Davis 1998: 225), and no doubt, Pickering joins him in this game, though, with reservations. For the professor, the only sacred object of worship is the language of Shakespeare, closer to his heart than any creature with a soul. Therefore he proves to be selfish, tactless, cold and self-sufficient. He acts as a linguistic racist who would erase all those from the face of the earth who do no speak "proper" English:

(13) HIGGINS. A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and a divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible. (Shaw 1916/1984: 27)

Higgins has a limited admiration for the dignified code of manners of the Victorian times because he considers it to be too artificial for him. He has an ironical attitude towards the British educational system, which produces no palpable result whatsoever.

(14) HIGGINS. Listen to this, Pickering. This is what we pay for as elementary education. This unfortunate animal has been locked up for nine years in school at our expense to teach her to speak and read the language of Shakespeare and Milton. And the result is Ahyee, B*ə*-yee, C*ə*-yee, D*ə*-ee. (Shaw 1916/1984: 64)

He detaches himself from the middle class morals and manners of the English society, he does not want to mingle with "these people", in fact with any other layers of the British society. He considers manners to be like clothes, which can be put on or taken off according to the context.

(15) HIGGINS. Very well, Pick: you behave yourself. Let us put on our best Sunday manners for this creature that we picked out of the mud. (Shaw 1916/1984: 119)

He overtly differentiates himself from the rest of the middle class by referring to one of them (Freddy) with the pronoun of exclusion: "God in Heaven! Another of *them*!". He watches them from a distance as a scientist watches the insects under his magnifying glass, emotionlessly; he only feels some kind of cold, superhuman passion aiming to change the

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

world. In his cold detachment he may be considered a stereotypical cold-blooded Englishman but he diverges from this stereotypical image because he is the creator who rises above other, "common" characters, disregarding middle-class morality.

This coldness emerges from his creative personality. The only passion he feels is for phonetics, and as a result, a desire to improve mankind. As mentioned in the introductory part, he appreciates only those who share his creative talent. Therefore he shows great respect for Doolittle, Eliza's father, a common dustman, in the personality of whom he discovers an in-born talent for rhetoric.

Alfred Doolittle, both in appearance and in personality, is very different from Colonel Pickering, still he is to Higgins' liking from the first moment. Doolittle appears in Wimpole Street described in the following way: *Alfred Doolittle is an elderly but vigorous dustman, clad in the costume of his profession, including a hat with a back brim covering his neck and shoulders. He has well marked and rather interesting features, and seems equally free from fear and conscience. He has a remarkably expressive voice, the result of a habit of giving vent to his feelings without reserve*. This is exactly what Higgins is looking for (somebody who gives *vent to his feelings without reserve*), though very often he is not able to achieve it because in his social position, he always needs to obey conventions. Doolittle is very cunning in his way of speaking, shrewdly replying his interlocutors' questions and following his own target at the same time: to extort money out of the two gentlemen. First he claims to have come for his daughter but when he is allowed to do it freely, he changes his strategy and having been threatened with the arrival of the police, he replies with a rhetoric question of his own:

(16) DOOLITTLE: Have I asked you for a brass farthing? I leave it to the gentleman here: have I said a word about money? (Shaw 1916/1984: 55)

With this statement he actually tries to achieve two things: gain time to think about the next step, and divide the two gentlemen. Then he continues in a most histrionic way, using repetitions with slight changes, which Higgins defines as "the Welsh strain in him":

(17) HIGGINS. Then how did you know she was here?
DOOLITTLE. [*most musical, most melancholy*] I'll tell you, Governor, if you'll only let me get a word in. I'm willing to tell you. I'm wanting to tell you. I'm waiting to tell you. (Shaw 1916/1984: 55)

This is the point when Higgins realizes that "this chap has a certain natural gift of rhetoric". He continues with the rhetorical device of repeating the same question again and again, at the same time addressing Higgins and Pickering by *Governor*, as a form of respect.

(18) DOOLITTLE. She said she didn't want no clothes. What was I to think from that, Governor? I ask you as a parent what was I to think? (Shaw 1916/1984: 56)

He artfully appeals to their common gender, the only line where he can hope for some solidarity, having the intuition that he can have a bargain with the professor:

(19) DOOLITTLE. Listen here, Governor. You and me is men of the world, ain't we? (Shaw 1916/1984: 57)

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

Pickering also admires his cleverness and artful eloquence, therefore he grants him the floor to speak, while addressing him with the deferential form of address, as a sign of respect:

(20) PICKERING: The floor is yours, Mr Doolittle. (Shaw 1916/1984: 57)

At this point Doolittle gives his speech in which he admits being open to an arrangement, again resorting to a pair of rhetorical questions: "What's a five pound note to you and what's Eliza to me?". When Pickering queries whether he has any morals, he replies, "unabashed" that he "can't afford them". He claims to belong to "the undeserving poor", but who needs more than "a deserving" one, because he is a "thinking man" who likes to have some "ginger" in his life: good food, enough to drink, amusement and women. At the end of his speech, Higgins finds Doolittle's power of conviction so irresistible that he finally gives him the money he came for.

Doolittle's moral and social attitudes contrast strongly with Eliza's. Eliza yearns to join the respectable lower middle-class. Doolittle finds that his job as a garbage collector is too low on the social scale to have any moral standards attached to it. He realizes that he already has the prerogatives of a duke, therefore loathes to rise (Crompton 1969). When the financial change finally takes place and he finds himself at the threshold of marriage with "blasted three thousand a year", he points to the disadvantages of being rich – "I have to live for others and not for myself: that's middle-class morality" – and expresses his sadness over the loss of his freedom.

By now, he is as tied by conventions as Higgins is. He is also elevated in the social scale, but he is naturally endowed with self-confidence, which gives him bright prospects for the future. As Higgins claims:

(21) HIGGINS. Eliza, it's quite true that your father is not a snob, and that he will be quite at home in any station of life to which his eccentric destiny may call him. (Shaw 1916/1984: 126)

The difference between Higgins and Doolittle at this point is that they both possess money and talent, fortune and creativity, but Higgins is more "protected" from "intimidation" because he is defended by his social status, while Doolittle is only an upstart, having acquired his fortune with his rhetorical talent.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we have given a succinct summary of the linguistic behaviour of some of the main characters in G. B. Shaw's much celebrated *Pygmalion*, concentrating on the manifestations of Britishness in their conversational interactions with each other. We started from the interpretation of the title, which gave the play a new, less conventional reading. The 20th century version of the Greek myth has been interpreted as a play about the condition of the creator and his relationship to the world around him. The analysis shows that the text has confirmed our conjectures. The characters display two sets of attitudes: one of the conventional, less creative, stereotypical characters, who use the linguistic markers of the British ethnic identity (very formal language, full of polite formulae, hedges, negative politeness strategies). The other extreme is the group of the creative, talented "artists" who do not fit into the schema of the British stereotype and whose language and manners,

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)

accordingly, reflect their freedom from boundaries, even to the point of using bad language and having bad manners. Therefore, ethnicity does not prove to be a closure to the play, instead an intertextual interpretation is offered as more plausible.

Zsuzsanna Ajtony
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca
ajtonyzsuzsa@yahoo.com

References

Augoustinos, M., Walker, I., Donaghue, N. 2006. *Social Cognition*. London: Sage Publications.
Barone, D. F., Maddux, J. I., Snyder, C. R. 1997. *Social Cognitive Psychology*. New York: Plenum Press.
Crompton, L. 1969. *Shaw the Dramatist*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Davis, T. C. 1998. Shaw's interstices of empire: Decolonizing at home and abroad. In C. Innes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, 218-239. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Eriksen, T. H. 2001. Ethnic identity, national identity and intergroup conflict: The significance of personal experiences. In R. D. Ashmore, L. J. Jussim, D. Wilder (eds.), *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict and Conflict Reduction*, 42-70. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Fox, K. 2005. *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. London: Hodder.
Lakoff, R. 1975. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.
Macrae, C. N., Milne, A. B., and Bodenhausen, G. V. 1994. Stereotypes as energy-saving devices: A peek inside the cognitive toolbox. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 66: 37-47.
Mills, S. 2003. *Gender and Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Shaw, G. B. 1916/1984. *Pygmalion*. London: Penguin Books.
Woolfolk, A., Hughes, M., Walkup, V. 2007. *Psychology in Education*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

BDD-A9853 © 2010 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:41 UTC)