

**COCKNEY AND RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION ACCENTS AS  
SIGNIFICANT SOCIAL CLASS DETERMINERS IN *MY FAIR LADY*  
MOVIE**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research has main objectives to identify the Cockney and Received Pronunciation accents in My Fair Lady movie spoken by Eliza Doolittle and Professor Henry Higgins. Also, the objective is to find the correlation between the accents and the social backgrounds of both speakers. The result of this research shows that the accents indeed can indicate Eliza and Higgins' social backgrounds. There are several characteristics that can distinct the Cockney and Received Pronunciation, such as H-dropping, Th- fronting, Diphthong shifting, and G- dropping. Eliza and Henry Higgins speak different accents because they come from different regions in London. Besides, from their accents, it is shown that Eliza with her strong Cockney accent comes from lower class while Henry Higgins with his Received Pronunciation accent comes from upper class. Furthermore, the correlation between accents and social backgrounds is also analyzed in this research.

**Key Words: Accent, Cockney, Received Pronunciation**

**ABSTRAK**

*Penelitian ini memiliki tujuan utama untuk mengidentifikasi Cockney dan Received Pronunciation aksen di film My Fair Lady yang diucapkan oleh Eliza Doolittle dan Profesor Henry Higgins. Juga, bertujuan untuk menemukan hubungan antara aksen dan latar belakang sosial dari kedua pembicara.*

*Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa aksen memang dapat menunjukkan latar belakang Eliza dan Higgin. Ada beberapa karakteristik yang dapat membedakan Cockney dan Received Pronunciation, seperti Pendropan huruf H, awalan lafal TH, perubahan diftong, pendropan huruf G. Eliza dan Henry Higgins berbicara aksen yang berbeda karena mereka berasal dari daerah yang berbeda di London. Selain itu, dari aksen mereka, terlihat bahwa Eliza dengan aksen Cockney-nya yang kuat berasal dari kelas bawah sedangkan Henry Higgins dengan aksen Received Pronunciation-nya berasal dari kelas atas. Selanjutnya, hubungan antara aksen dan latar belakang kelas sosial juga dianalisis di penelitian ini.*

*Kata Kunci: Aksen, Cockney, Received Pronunciation*



## INTRODUCTION

### Background of Study

Communication is a social interaction that happens when people have motivation to share their emotions systematically (Susilo, 2012). There are two types of communication, non-verbal and verbal communication. Consciously, people tend to use verbal communication in their daily life through spoken and written expression by using a device called as language. Language has many varieties and functions, including accent as social class determiners. One language that has several accents is English.

English accents in British itself have power to classify people into social structures in society. The social structures have been determined through various accents used by British people according to regions where they live. For example, working class in Liverpool mostly use *Scouse* accent while in Eastern part of London, people use *Cockney*. In Southeast of England, middle class mostly use *Estuary* accent and the upper class use *Received Pronunciation* which is considered as a standard accent in United Kingdom and mostly spoken by The Royal British Family. Among all of them, the accents widely used in classical era and probably until now are *Cockney* and *Received Pronunciation* accents. Both accents are very contrast, since one identifies a lower class and another identifies an upper class. It is very interesting, even this relation between accent and social class were succeed in making George Bernard Shaw adapted it into a musical play with title *Pygmalion*. The play is about a phonetician Professor Henry Higgins who is so sure to transform a *Cockney* working class girl into a member of high society. Then, this play was created

into a film version in 1964 with title *My Fair Lady*.

From this very interesting linguistics phenomena brought to a play, this research entitled *Cockney and Received Pronunciation Accents as Significant Social Class Determiners in My Fair Lady Movie*. Since *My Fair Lady* movie is all about accents and social classes, the writer will analyze the movie through sociolinguistics point of view, especially speech community. The writer believes that Labov's theory is the most suitable to this study, dealing with accents requires sounds, including pronunciation and intonation. Thus, to facilitate this research to be more effectively understandable, the writer will also use Phonology in this study.

## THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

### Sociolinguistics

In 1952, the American linguist Haver C. Currie first proposed the concept of sociolinguistics, but it became an independent discipline in the 1960s. William Labov and D. H. Hermes were the representatives of the time. Richard Hudson argues that sociolinguistics is a discipline that links the language of social studies. According to this concept, the interaction between language and society is the focus of social linguistics, which combines the different disciplines of theoretical methods (sociology, linguistics), with a different perspective on the use of language embodied social characteristics. Its purpose is to better understand the language structure and language in the communication how to exercise their function. In Hudson's view, a person's language has a lot to do with his or her social background, and his or her experience is largely determined by the language spoken by him or her (Hudson, 2000). Sociolinguistics is the study of the

relationship between society and language disciplines, which includes two aspects, namely language and society.

### **Speech Community**

Speech community shares the same speech characteristics, norms, and interpreting communications. It can be large regions which have certain dialects or accents. Speech can be an identity for community, including social backgrounds, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, age, ideology, and formal variables of the linguistic usage. Variety of languages such as styles, dialects, and community. Besides, he also theorized that speech communities are made up of a number of domains which organize and define social life.

### **Accent**

Accents are also part of speech

The characteristic vocabulary of the Cockney is said to be slang, which consists of words used in a joking, rather

accents, are parts of speech community.

Each of them has levels of usage to be applied by members in a community. This statement is supported by Fishman (1971) which hypothesized that a speech community is “all of whose members share at least a single speech variety and the norms for its appropriate use”. Fishman put language varieties and norms as parts of concept identifying a speech

accent so described to be a general model. (Parsons, 1998)

### **Cockney**

community and can be defined by in what region the speakers live, from what social background they come from, in what social class they are classified, and probably what gender they are. In classical era, British people considered much in pronunciation, articulation, and grammar used in society.

In *My Fair Lady*, many scenes noticeably show the difference accents spoken by some characters which later also identify in their social structure, so there are upper class and lower class. Professor Higgins uses Received Pronunciation accent which also considered as an upper class language or a “proper” English because he is an educated person (a phonetician), while Eliza uses Cockney accent, a lower class language, because she is only a flower seller. For upper class members, they tend to pay attention to a good sentence arrangement, stress, grammar, pronunciation, and intonation. In the other hand, lower class members less pay attention on such linguistics skill and performance.

### **Received Pronunciation**

The name 'received pronunciation' was used by Ellis (1867-97) to describe the speech of educated and polite society. 'Received' here means 'agreed upon by those fit to judge'. The word is sometimes taken to mean 'received socially', as in the leading drawing rooms. This interpretation tempts Macaulay 1988 to ridicule it as 'a rather absurd, almost comic term, [...] with the implication that lacking it one [...] would not be welcome at court'. This interpretation is the one current today. At the time when it was first

introduced, it may be noted, it makes no claim for the flippant way. 'The Oxford English Dictionary defines slang as "language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed \* in some special sense." Although the history of the word "slang" is obscure, there may have been an Anglo-Saxon verb "slingan" meaning "to creep, wind, or twist" with a past tense "slang" and a past participle "slungen 11;2 and certainly slang is slung around the East End every minute of the day (Fowler, 1984)

### **Phonology**

Phonology is the study of how sounds are organized in particular language. It discovers the psychological patterns and underlying organization of sounds shared by native speakers of a certain language (Panevoya, 2010). According to Chomsky and Halle, phonology and phonetics are two important components in English as they complete the universal grammar in Chomsky hypothesis.

“The phonological component expresses the relationship between the surface structure of a sentence and its physical actualization insofar as this relationship is determined by grammatical rule, in the very general sense which we will elucidate below. The surface structure may be represented as a string of formatives, properly bracketed with labeled brackets (see Chapter One, Section 5). Given the surface structure of a sentence, the phonological rules of the language interact with certain universal phonetic constraints to derive all grammatically determined acts

about the production and perception of this sentence.” (Chomsky, 1968)

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study focuses on the relation between accents of language and social class determination in My Fair Lady movie. Since the writer analyzes the object of the study by using non-numerical data, exploration, and meaning of the hidden context, the study approach used is qualitative.

## ANALYSIS

### Significant Difference of Eliza’s Cockney English and Higgins’ Received Pronunciation

#### 1. H (/h/) Dropping

Dropping the /h/ sound is a feature of some dialects and accents spoken by working classes in several areas in London, especially those who speak Cockney English. Cockney accent has been well known for this characteristic for centuries.

The vowels that come after the front /h/ affect much for Cockney speakers, so their glottal stops and turns the /h/ letter become soundless and pronounce the vowels right away instead. In the other hand, this kind of characteristic does not occur in RP accent.

/h/ letter sound also can determine whether people belong to working class or higher class. The higher level that people in a society, the more /h/ can be listened clearly.

“Oh, it’s because I called ‘im Cap’n. I meant no ‘arm. Sir, don’t let ‘im lay a charge against me for a word like that.”

From the script above, the underlined words normally have /h/ as the initial; harm [hɑ:m] and him [him]. Even

on the written script, the /h/ is not written and changed by the punctual [‘] instead. In using the phonetic transcription of English Dictionary by Murray, in standard English that is considered also as RP at that time, harm and him in which the /h/ is pronounced clearly with glottal open and sound produced as in pronunciation of house, how, Helen, and hero. However, in Cockney, the words turn into [‘ɑ:m] with getting rid of the /h/ sound in the initial and pronouncing the long vowel /a/ or /ɑ/ blended with the rest of consonants. The /h/ also disappeared in the word him and the phonetic turns into [‘im].

Besides not uttering the /h/ sound, the Cockney speakers also often tack it to the words that they should not. The contrast of this /h/ sound between Cockney and RP, especially in the dialogue of Eliza and Professor Higgins can be easily found in the movie. For example when Professor Henry Higgins trains Eliza with her /h/ by the sentence below:

“In Hartford, Hereford, and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen”.

[hɑ: tʃɔ: tɔ: d, hɛrɪfɔ:d, hæmʃəɪ , hʌrɪkən, hɑ:dlē, hevər, hæ.p’n]

With her strong Cockney accent, Eliza pronounced it as following:

“In ‘artford, ‘ereford, and ‘ampshire, ‘urricanes ‘ardly hever ‘appen.”

[‘ɑ: tʃɔ: tɔ: d, ‘ɛrɪfɔ:d, ‘æmʃəɪ , ‘ʌrɪkən, ‘ɑ:dlē, hevər, ‘æ.p’n]

For people who live in lower social status, such as East End

London, the /h/ dropping often dominates their speech and this is the distinction that sounds very clearly.

erentiates between Cockney and RP

accents. /th/ sound, as one of the fricatives in phonology, has two pronunciation characteristics. Those characteristics are voiced fricative and voiceless fricative. Voiced fricatives can be found in such as words: them [ðem], they [ðei], that [ðæt], there [ðeəɪ], and this [ðis]. This first characteristic is pronounced heavily with the vibration between tip of tongue and top of mouth. In phonology, this consonant is symbolized as /ð/.

Some phonetic phenomena traditionally associated with the speech of London (glottalization, [v] for [r], TH-Fronting, for example pronouncing <th> as [f] or [v]) have also arisen further afield, in parts of England and Scotland and, rightly or wrongly, been attributed to influence of the metropolis. For example, TH-Fronting, a merger most likely due to the phonological markedness of [θ] and [ð] as compared to [f] and [v] (Kerswill 2003: 240).

Oppositely, voiceless fricatives [θ] are pronounced lighter and less vibration between tip of tongue and backside of the upper teeth. This characteristic is as on the words: *thin* [θin], *thick* [θik], *throw* [θrəʊ], and *theory* [θiəɹē]. What the writer has found in My Fair Lady movie is that both voiced and voiceless fricatives dominantly distinct Cockney and RP. RP pronounce th-fronting as it has symbolized as the standard sound in most English dictionary. In the other hand, Cockney and other various urban accents the dental fricatives tend to be replaced (or realized identically with) other phonemes, namely /f/ for /θ/ and /v/ or /d/ for /ð/ (Trudgill 1984: 57).

*“Well if you was a gentlemen,*

## 2. TH (/θ/ and /ð/) Fronting

This is also a feature that diff

*you might ask me to sit down. I think.”*

A line by Eliza above is a simple example of /th/ fronting in Cockney accent. Eliza uttered it [fɪŋk] instead of [θɪŋk] as how RP speakers will pronounce it. In another dialogues of Eliza, this characteristic frequently appears in My Fair Lady not only in the words that has

/th/ in initial, but also at the end of the sound.

*“Don’t confuse the one with the other if you want to become a lady in a shop.”*

The word “with” and “other” in dialogue above are examples of /th/ sound at the middle and the end of the words. The th-fronting in with [wið], the [ðe], and other [oðer] are shifted to [wiv], [ve:], and [over].

### 3. Diphthong Shifting

Cockney, as a London urban accent, has several sound changes in pronouncing vowels. This changing seems quite significant to distinct it from RP accent. Vowel itself has several types that differ sounds, but what the writer has found in My Fair Lady movie is mostly different sounds in diphthong. Diphthong shift is one of characteristics of the local accent of London, Birmingham, and much of the south and midlands (Wells 1984: 62). Cockney which is used to have majority of speakers in London, sounds clearly in a case of shifting the vowels. According to Wells, the consequence is that Cockney *race* may sound like *rice* in RP accent, *tie* like *toy*, and *mean* can sound like *main*. As the famous line in My Fair Lady movie that becomes so iconic when Eliza is trained by Professor Higgins her diphthongs so it will be sounded properly as RP.

*“The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.”*

What Professor Higgins teaches to Eliza sounds as [ðə reɪn ɪn speɪn steɪz meɪnli ɪn ðə pleɪn]. There are the same long sound in vowels of the statement, that is /eɪ/. This /eɪ/ sound is a characteristic in RP accent. However, when Eliza tried to pronounce it, it is shifted and turned into /aɪ/ or /ʌɪ/. Eliza says [raɪ] as if it is in



*rine*, [spɹɪn] as in *spine*, and [plɪn] as in *pline*. In this case, the diphthong of Cockney sounds longer and wider than RP. This pattern of speech is also attached on words that have *-ay* ending such as *day* that sounds like *die*, *say* like *shy* with /s/ not /ʃ/, and *away* like *aye why*.

Wells (1984: 63) considered next the long vowels and diphthongs which tend generally towards a back or close quality, for example those lexical sets *mouth*, *goat*, and *goose* as in RP /aʊ, əʊ, and u:/ as well as certain possible new types, products of the vocalization of /l/. The traditional London accent equivalent of RP [əʊ] has a much lower nucleus; thus *boat* tends to be articulated as [bʌʊt]. Moreover, the use of a noticeably different allophone, [ɹʊ], before velar [l] means that, owing to L-vocalization, [ʌʊ] and [ɹʊ] are potentially in phonological opposition in pairs such as *so/sew/sow* and *soul*: /sʌʊ/ v. /sɹʊ/ (Wells 1982: 312-313).

*“Look where you’re goin’,  
dear. Look where you’re  
goin’.”*

This statement of Eliza was spoken in the very first she comes up in the first scene of the movie. She pronounces /gəʊɪn/ instead of /gəʊɪŋ/. So there is another diphthong shift which is turning the RP of /o/ or /o:/ sound into Cockney /aʊ/ or /oʊ/.

Cockney, together with London urban speech in general and that of other southern and Midland dialects, has taken the Great English Vowel Shift a stage further than in RP: the closing diphthongs [æʊ] and [ʌʊ] show a clockwise movement with respect to RP [aʊ] and [əʊ]: *mouth* [mæʊf], *boat* [bʌʊt]; the remaining closing ones, [ɹɪ] and [ɔɪ], show an anti-clockwise movement with respect to RP [eɪ], [aɪ]

and [aɪ]: *paint* [phɹɪɪnt], *pint* [phɹɪɪnt], *point* [phɹɔɪnt] (Wells, 1982: 31).

#### 4. G-Dropping

The g-dropping is pretty familiar for its well-known characteristic in English dialect or accents. This also can be a measurement to identify social classes in society. Working class in London, including Cockney, has this sound change in pronouncing consonant that has phoneme –ng or in phonetics symbolized /ŋ/ before vowels at the end of the word. G-dropping is the pronunciation of the –ing ending with an alveolar rather than a velar nasal, thus [ˈwɔ:kɪn] for [ˈwɔ:kɪŋ] *walking*, [ˈri:dɪn] for [ˈri:dɪŋ] *reading*. The name refers to the the spelling device sometimes used to signal this pronunciation, thus *walkin'*, *readin'* (Wells, 1994).

Almost in every dialogue of Eliza, the words with the /ŋ/ sound are missing the /-g/ and merely heard the /n'/ sound. It can be seen from Eliza's line as following:

*“Look where you're goin', dear.  
Look where you're goin'.”*

The word *going* which should be /gəʊɪŋ/ is shifted to *goin'* /gəʊɪn'/. The replacement of /ŋ/ with /n'/ sometimes indicates that the accent is spoken by lower class in England at that time. Eliza as a girl coming from lower class background, uses this g-dropping a lot.

*“Good mornin', my good man.  
Might I have the pleasure of a word  
with you face-to-face?”*

Eliza says *morning* as [mɔ:ni'] instead of [mɔ:niŋ]. The difference might be unnoticeable, but from this gap, the social background of the speakers can be revealed.

### **Cockney and RP Accents as Reflection of Eliza and Professor Henry Higgins Social Background**

This part answers the second statement of the problems in this analysis. The difference is affected by the geographical regions where Eliza and Professor Higgins come from.

Though both hero and heroine live in London, Professor Higgins lives in an urban area of London while Eliza lives in a slum area in south London. These two regions of London subject to the economic, political, and other conditions, though they are not quite far apart, the languages used are very different. In the United Kingdom itself, language is very important to symbolize and classify people whether they belong to upper or lower class. This kind of geographical environment brings not only the differences between the upper social class and lower social class in culture and the concept, but also the language differences (Dan, 2017: 165)

The story line of *My Fair Lady* itself tells about a young girl named Eliza that sells flowers for a living. She comes from an area called Lisson Grove which located in southern part of Greater London, United Kingdom. South London itself is quite famous place for the living of majority of working class. This region is well known as a slum area where Eliza grew up and surrounded by people that speak Cockney. She was born from a woman in prostitution whose identity is unknown and a drunkard man who always asks for pence to Eliza named Alfie Doolittle. From this background, Eliza was born with a strong Cockney accent which considered by Professor Higgins as accent that “painfully to ears.” Cockney speakers tends to use non-standard form of language which makes Eliza belong to low level language community.

*there crooning like a bilious pigeon.”*

Since it sounds far different from RP as the standard English, Professor Higgins thinks that Cockney is a

*“A woman who utters such disgusting and depressing noises has no right to be anywhere. No right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech. That your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and the Bible. Don't sit*

disgraceful to English language. Not because the origin of the accents, but the pronunciation and the features of language that is highly distinct from standard English at that time. Eliza's humble language is considered like a pigeon which is unworthy to live in a society.

In the other hand, Professor Higgins as a linguist lives in Wimpole Street, Marylebone Road, Central London. Regarding to the setting of time in *My Fair Lady*, this regions were well-known as where upper class lives. He speaks Received Pronunciation (RP) which is well known as a standard English at that time. RP has traditionally been the prestigious accent in Britain, because of its association with the aristocracy and with the professional and wealthy classes (Trudgill, 1984). His profession as a "linguist" and his degree as "professor" gives an anecdote that he is a well-educated, noble, and has high level in society.

*"Simple phonetics. The science of speech. That's my profession, also my hobby. Anyone can spot an Irishman or a Yorkshire man by his brogue, but I can place a man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets."*

Professor Higgins is aware of the close relationship between language and social status. His high social status in society drives him to speak RP which is spoken by upper class in London at that time. RP itself considered as standard English because it is used by Royal family and BBC Radio. That is why, when Professor Higgins speaks with Eliza for the very first time, he looks down her for having such disturbing pronunciation of her Cockney accent and even call her "disgrace to the noble architecture of these column" and "incarnate insult of English language." As what he said in *My Fair Lady*, that people use language to classify someone's place in society.

When people speak English without good pronunciation, society will despise him. Professor Higgins speaks RP as standard English which makes him belong to upper class and high level speech community. He values the standard of English and believes that it will bring people to better level of social class in society.

educational, and social backgrounds.

## CONCLUSION

My Fair Lady has always been a movie that is entertaining and very educating, especially for those who learn language. There are many factors that can influence the language varieties in society, including the geographical and social factors. Even people who live in the same city can produce different language based on the regions they were born and living. The language difference can be from the intonation, articulation, and pronunciation, which later we call it as accent. In My Fair Lady case, the accents contrasted are Cockney and Received Pronunciation. The differences between both accents can significantly be found by using English phonology.

My Fair Lady cannot only make people enjoy the beautiful and wonderful plot, but it also makes us learn that people's language play an important role in reflecting their origins and social backgrounds. This is how Sociolinguistics works, when the correlation between language and society are linked. Cockney can be defined as lower speech language because it is spoken by lower class in South London, while RP considered as standard English because it is spoken by upper class. The difference of language form represents the difference of social form. Language symbolize the society, which does not only convey the function in text context but also the social information. People can be classified what classes they belong to from the language they speak, including regions,

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