

## PRAGMATICS OF METAMORPHOSIS IN G. B. SHAW'S *PYGMALION*

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study pragmatics of metamorphosis in G. B. Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. The role and effects of the inhabitants of society and the society's counter effects are critically analyzed through the dramatist's master strokes; drama of ideas and purpose, characters and characterization, the language in use. *Pygmalion* runs on many levels of pragmatics, as Shaw ventures to expose the hidden oddities and absurdities of his native language and its pretentious society. The unfolding lies in Higgins' determination to teach Eliza, the proper use of language, develop a pragmatics of relationship between the teacher and the taught. We trace not a smooth journey; the stifle strife connecting the two begins and continues to the end. When Eliza has to learn the proper English she necessarily has to live in that proper environment which produces proper English. The process of transformation and evolution takes momentum in the flower girl, who resolves to dictate her new thoughts of winning a momentary position of a duchess for Higgins and his friend Colonel Pickering, and profession of a lady in a florist shop for herself. This conscious development directs her to improve upon her economic and social prominence and prestige but at the cost of her lost social liberty.

**Key words:** drama of ideas, hidden oddities and absurdities, language, metamorphosis, pragmatics, transformation.

"The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated."

(Shaw *Pygmalion*, 769)

George Bernard Shaw, as we know, is known by the virtue of his words, use of language carrying his brilliant wit and killing humour, the best use of it, most appropriately. It is the inner and deeper meaning of the 'coded' words, that come to life, when addressed and practiced in the very worldly-world of our actual existence. Going beyond semantics would be more relevant, as each of us live with one another, to communicate and interact, pertaining to our prescribed social contexts. Language and society are not autonomous. Language is outcome of its orientation to society. What else is pragmatics, if I may ask? We may define it as a subdivision of linguistics which is concerned with the use of language in social contexts and the means by which people

produce and comprehend meanings through the use of language. Ronald Wardhaugh in his Sociolinguistic approach explains that:

“Communication among people who speak the same language is possible because they share such knowledge, although how it is shared – or even how it is acquired – is not well understood. Certainly, psychological and social factors are important, and genetic ones too. Language is a communal possession, although admittedly an abstract one. Individuals have access to it and constantly show that they do so by using it properly. As we will see, a wide range of skills and activities is subsumed under this concept of ‘proper use.’” (Ronald Wardhaugh: 2006, 2)

Interestingly, the term *pragmatics* was coined by C.W. Morris, the philosopher, in the 1930s, but a decade or earlier in 1912, G. B. Shaw wrote *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts* later published and performed in 1914. In the Preface entitled, ‘A Professor of Phonetics’ Shaw writes:

“The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. They cannot spell it because they have nothing to spell it with but an old foreign alphabet of which only the consonants-and not all of them-have any agreed speech value. Consequently no man can teach himself what it should sound like from reading it; and it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him...The reformer we need today is an energetic phonetic enthusiast: that is why I have made such a one the hero of a popular play.” (Shaw: 659)

Shaw is a man of many talents, when he writes on one issue his target is pluralized. His superb artistic talent lies in didacticism, a concern for human societies. In the same preface he declares loud and clear:

“I wish to boast the *Pygmalion* has been an extremely successful play, both on stage and screen, all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art can never be anything else.” (Shaw: 663).

Trying to give a modern interpretation to the Mythological story of *Pygmalion* and his ideal sculpture-woman coming to life, Shaw opened entirely fresh avenues, thus, introducing the drama of ideas. G. B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion* runs on many levels of pragmatics, as Shaw ventured to expose the hidden oddities and absurdities of his native language and its society. Bringing forth his hero, Professor Henry Higgins, a reformer by nature and a linguist by profession, and “an energetic phonetic enthusiast,” Shaw introduces another brilliantly unique discourse in the realm of human life in relation to its community. Professor Higgins’ speech addressed to an uneducated, poor flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, in response to her “kerbstone English” (Shaw: 680) stirs in her a metamorphosis of social, economic and literary order. He tells her:

“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; and don’t sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.” (Shaw: 679).

With the multitude of facets, the pragmatics of heterogeneous classification can be seen through the play. Higgins' determination to teach Eliza, the proper use of language, develops a pragmatics of relationship between the teacher and the taught. It is not a smooth journey; the stifle strife connecting the two begins and continues to the end. Eliza could not endure the stigma she was, "an incarnate insult to the English language." (680). The desire for change in Eliza ignites. With a penetrated Shavian philosophy, Higgins says, "What is life but a series of inspired follies? The difficulty is to find them to do. Never lose a chance: it doesn't come every day. I shall make a duchess of this draggetailed guttersnipe... Yes in six months-in three if she has a good ear and a quick tongue-I'll take her anywhere and pass her off as anything. We'll start today: now! this moment! Take her away and clean her Mrs Pearce. (Shaw: 691). When Eliza has to learn the proper English she necessarily has to live in that proper environment which produces proper English. The process of transformation and evolution takes momentum in the flower girl, who resolves to dictate her new thoughts of winning a momentary position of a duchess for Higgins and his friend Colonel Pickering; another scholar, and profession of a lady in a florist shop for herself. This conscious development directs her to improve upon her economic and social prominence and prestige. As life had already taught her many lessons of life saving strategies in her independent days of poverty, she learns very fast the desired English, accepting the new ordeal rather courageously, excelling in her persistence with her new crude master, Professor Higgins. And now, she demands to be treated liked a lady. She announces to speak sensible only to those who would speak sensible to her. But Professor Higgins with his stern nature, deprived of sentiments, resolves to remain a chunk of wood to her as she to him. Her pride in knowing English is seen in a humorously difficult situation when Eliza negotiates with Higgins regarding the fee for teaching her, her own language, English. It is only her little problem with the proper English. For the rest she is remarkably confident. Undoubtedly innocent yet prudently clear, she tells Professor Higgins:

"Oh, I know what's right. A lady friend of mine gets French lessons for eightpence an hour from a real French gentleman. Well, you wouldn't have the face to ask me the same for teaching me my own language as you would for French; so I won't give more than a shilling. Take it or leave it." (Shaw: 689).

We also see that, Eliza is not the only one receiving instruction. Throughout, the play, we find two levels of instruction being imparted. On one hand Higgins gives phonetic lessons to Eliza and he himself continues to receive lessons from his old mother, his maid and Colonel Pickering in regard to his manners and behaviour. Colonel Pickering is, undoubtedly, a foil to Higgins. Eliza later remarks to Pickering:

"But it was from you that I learnt really nice manners; and that it is what makes a lady, isn't it? You see it was so very difficult for me with the example of Professor Higgins before me." Drawing a comparison between Higgins' behaviour and her own parental upbringing, she continues, "I was brought up to be just like him, unable to control myself and using bad language on the slightest provocation. And I should never have known that ladies and gentlemen didn't behave like that if you hadn't been there." (Shaw: 768).

Her real education, apparently, began with Colonel Pickering. She relentlessly learned never to copy Higgins' manners. It may be appropriate here to state "Knowing a language also means knowing how to use that language since speakers know not only how to form sentences but also

how to use them appropriately. There is therefore another kind of competence, sometimes called communicative competence.” (Ronald Wardhaugh: 2006). The two men are placed in sharp contrast to each other, except that both were only true gentlemen, if we see through the word. Higgins never means any harm by his impertinent remarks, though he very well knows the use of language appropriately in social situations. He simply doesn't “intend to change” his manners. Crippled with politeness ambiguity, it is often reminded to him to be immensely “particular” (Shaw: p. 773) in his use of language when dealing with the new pupil. All his teachings would come to a knot, if he were to teach her the language out of the contextual acceptance.

Dukore suggests that "a member of a particular social class is revealed not only by his speech and behavior, he is revealed also by the way in which he is treated" (288). Whereas Pickering noticeably treats Eliza Doolittle, lowly flower girl, in the same manner as he would treat a lady. His is an attempt to eliminate the class distinction through "treatment that does not take such distinctions into account" (288). Higgins treats Eliza just as rudely and inconsiderately as he treats every other person. MacCarthyreach agreement with Dukore. He says, "The self-absorption of Higgins's makes his behaviour as inconsiderate as lack of education makes Eliza's, but at least he treats everyone alike. He may be rude, but his rudeness is not discriminating" (112). Pickering and Higgins in unison have their failure to recognize that Eliza's mission to improve herself was not to simply upswing in the respectable society, "but [is] first of all the result of a doglike devotion to two masters who have taken trouble over her" (Crompton: 147). Pragmatics of cultural and intercultural clashes marks many interesting episodes in the Play. Exploitation of various shades between the rich and the poor, the poorly-rich and the rich creates and dismantles possibility and order. Here, shifting of a persona with class from the old to the new brings about an acutely complicated rearrangement and reconstruction of values. Mr. Doolittle, a dustman and Eliza's father, when unfortunately subscribes to the middle class, curses his fortune, for the loss of liberty. He cries, “Ruined me. Destroyed my happiness. Tied me up and delivered me into the hands of middle class morality.” (760). With the shift of his class, his world alters. He tells Professor Higgins, “I'll have to learn to speak middle class language from you, instead of speaking proper English.” (Shaw: 762). Well! Proper is, what seems proper, to place, time and action. We, thus, find a continued sarcastic undertone running parallel to the Eliza's newly acquired hypocritical English society.

The new society demanded a change of appearance and apparel, before the linguistic lessons began. Eliza had to go through all. Returning victorious after playing the role of a true duchess, she received no reward or a word of praise from her mentors. Eliza, then, exhibits her deadly rage by pelting slippers at Professor Higgins. The tragic climax is that, she is too much of a lady to assume any profession now. What is to become of her? She asks Higgins, “Oh! if I only could go back to my flower basket! I should be independent of both you and father and all the world! Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up? I'm a slave now, for all my fine clothes.” (777). The story shows several stages of metamorphosis of identity in Eliza. However, having acquired the education, skill and proficiency, Lady Eliza claims her independence from her unfriendly teacher. But is Higgins so easy to deal with? Not at all! “a tower of strength” and “a consort of battleship. You and I and Pickering will be three old bachelors together instead of only two men and a silly girl” (Shaw: 781). This calls to erase the gender discrimination, the slaving nature of women. A typical Shavian anti romantic hero, Professor Higgins tells Eliza,

“I don't want trade in affection. You call me a brute because you couldn't buy a claim on me by fetching my slippers and finding my spectacles. You

were a fool: I think a woman fetching a man's slippers is a disgusting sight: did I ever fetch your slippers? I think a good deal more of you for throwing them in my face. No use slaving for me and then saying you want to be cared for: who cares for a slave? If you come back, come back for the sake of fellowship; for you'll get nothing else...and if you dare to set up your little dog's tricks of fetching and carrying slippers against my creation of a Duchess Eliza, I'll slam the door in your silly face." (Shaw: 776).

He would not let the new woman, his most majestic creation, fall under the hands of Freddy, a romantic fool who has no purpose, no ability to make anything out of her. Another issue pertains to her gender. She is learning to talk and live the lives of the language of men. A brief introduction to the female gathering keeps Eliza aloof from the realities of the female gentry. The two, Higgins and Eliza are united by will and divided by tradition. Brutally wounded by the threat of Eliza taking up a profession of a phonetics teacher for herself, he tries to convince her to remain a bachelor, very much like him. But, alas! She leaves. Higgins has to do without her.

Higgins' tragic flaw lies not in his inability to master the rules of his social language it is rather, his pragmatic incompetence to some extent which makes Eliza desert him finally. Though his pragmatic dilemma slashed all social acceptances, Higgins' professional competence remains his crowning glory. Nevertheless, the loss of pragmatic competence and mutual empathy between the two creates the space for an unending tale of humanity. And the metamorphosis continues.

**Note:** The quotations follow the unchanged spellings and punctuations as published by *The Bodely Head Bernard Shaw Collected Plays with their Prefaces*. Ed. Dan H. Lawrence. Vol. 4. London: Hamilton, 1974.

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